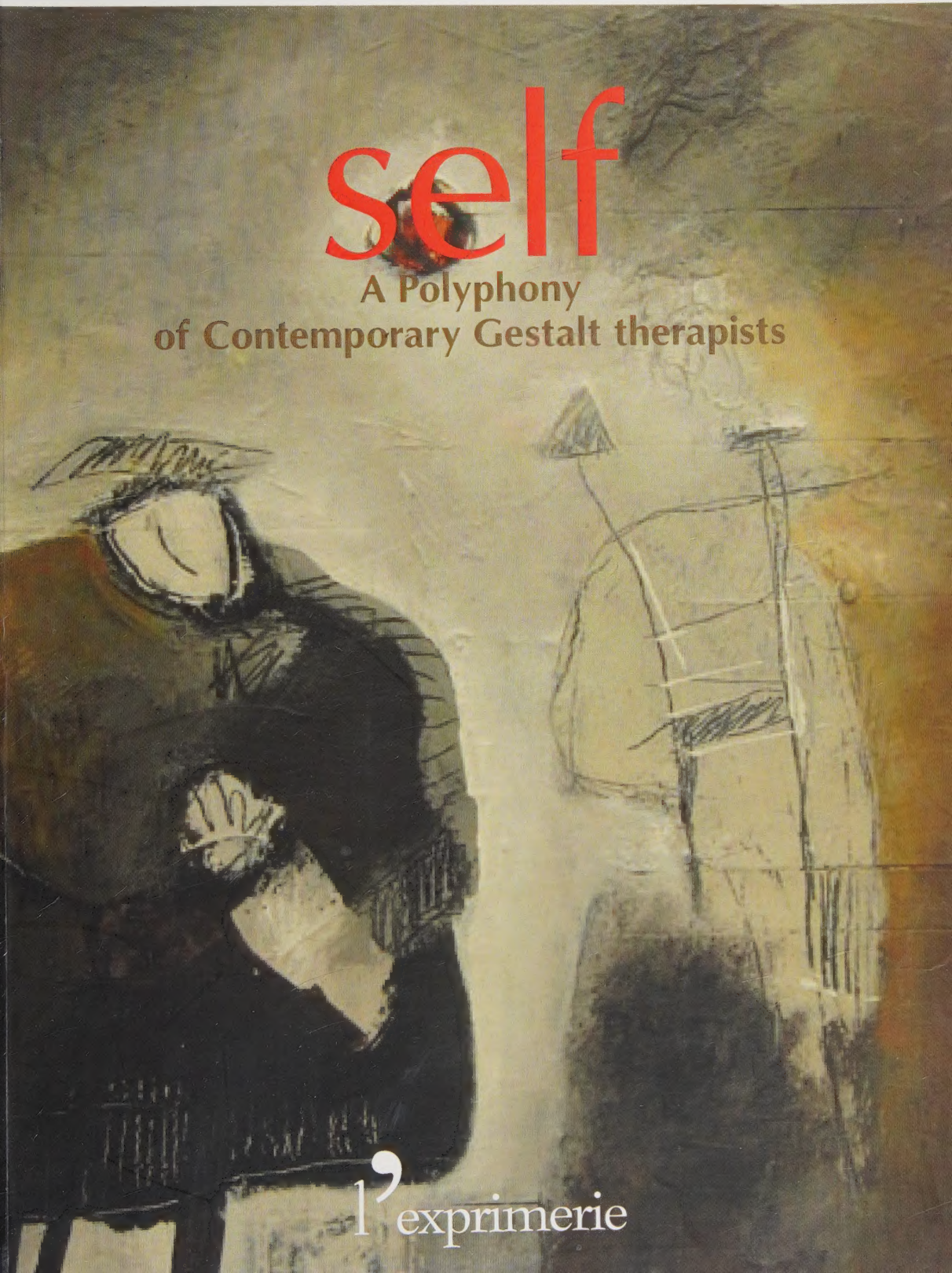
JEAN-MARIE ROBINE (Ed.)

self

A Polyphony of Contemporary Gestalt therapists



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Self

A Polyphony of Contemporary Gestalt Therapists

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SELF

A Polyphony of Contemporary Gestalt therapists

Carmen VAZQUEZ, Claudia BAPTISTA TÁVORA, Dan BLOOM, Erving POLSTER, Frank M. STAEMMLER, Gary YONTEF, Georges WOLLANTS, Gianni FRANCESETTI, Gilles DELISLE & Line GIRARD, Gordon WHEELER, Jean-Marie ROBINE, Kenneth MEYER, Lynne JACOBS, Margherita SPAGNUOLO LOBB, Michael Vincent MILLER, Mônica BOTELHO ALVIM, Peter PHILIPPSON, Philip BROWNELL, Ruella FRANK

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Overture

Jean-Marie ROBINE

Clear the elements of form, arrange them
into subdivisions; the disruption of this
order and the reconstruction of a totality
of all sides simultaneously,
plastic polyphony, obtaining rest
through the balance of movement.

Paul Klee

Preceded by a work teeming with intuition, new conceptions and original directions for further work – *Ego, Hunger and Aggression* by F.S. Perls – the founding text of Gestalt therapy published in 1951 developed, extended and architected the experiences and theoretical considerations of two major authors. Frederick Perls, a psychiatrist who started out as a psychoanalyst, and Paul Goodman, an essayist and "man of letters" as he liked to define himself, gathered together their proposals for a paradigm shift in writing the book *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality.*

The creation of a theory of self – the backbone of their formulation – opens up radically innovative perspectives. The rare psychological or psychotherapeutic currents that preceded them, along with those that developed subsequently to their work, have for the most part restricted the notion of self to the subject, or even to one or another of its dimensions. But such a reduction does not take into account what English-speaking linguists and philosophers have demonstrated: that "self" is both a process and the outcome of that process, as we can see in the compound words that use "self" as a prefix or suffix. In light of this, the usual solipsism can no longer prevail and the entire range of theoretical and methodological implications for psychotherapy is rethought, deconstructed and reconstructed.

Even English-language Gestalt therapy trainers and writers recognize the difficulty of shifting students' attention from subjectivity to subjectification, from the individual to individuation, and from the intrapsychic paradigm to that of contact as "first reality", which involves taking a field perspective. It is true that up until the late eighties, the reference to the field perspective was more of a slogan than an embodied reality and, consequently, the fact that the self was approached under an individualistic definition had hardly any consequences. But gradually, over the past twenty to thirty years, many of us have made the epistemological leap and revisited our concepts, methods and clinical approach to anchor them in the field perspective. It's a daunting task, and probably not yet finished – let us hope not, since it's important to keep moving – given the intrapsychic tradition that clings to our neurons!

A major problem arises from the issue of language. Very few languages can translate the concept of self without amputating its reflexive component. Some cultures choose to integrate certain words that come from other languages, while others are allergic to such imports and translate instead. This is the case for the word "awareness", whose translations in different languages distort its foundation. And it is of course the case for "self". The results are sometimes surprising, if not dramatic. Once I happened to be debating with an author who was well known in the countries where his language was spoken, who claimed that Perls had never used the concept of self and that this concept was the contribution of Goodman alone and distorted Perls' thinking. Accordingly, he produced a multitude of writings and teachings to oppose Perls' thinking with Goodman's by dichotomizing the reference to the "I" or "Ego" and the reference to the self as falling under two distinct, incompatible theories! I was surprised, to say the least, to hear that Perls had never used the concept of self, especially since some of his articles even feature it in their titles, and our discussion revealed that this author had only had access to Perls' writings in translation, published by a publisher which – doubtless to reject American imperialism! – had kept not even the slightest word or concept of the original English language. Thus, "self" became "I".

Having had the chance to teach Gestalt therapy in some thirty countries and thereby contribute to training professionals, I realized that the concept of self was almost never used, for example when clinical work was being commented. And although this concept and others stemming from it are amply covered in teaching (at my Institute, 25 to 30 days of training are devoted to it), the rhizomes that grow out of it seem to be quite well applied and analyzed, but the trunk from which they emanate seems obscured. Sometimes this is my case as well, since "self" is not part of my everyday language and, as Isadore From liked

to recall with a smile, "No one has ever seen a self!" It would be so much easier if we could consider it as an entity!

From these findings – and several others – were born the project of this book. It seemed useful and interesting to question Gestalt therapy theorists on their understanding and use of this concept, and to invite them to deploy it and clarify the directions in which they may have been able to influence and enrich it.

The authors of these chapters are the major theorists of Gestalt therapy today. All of them seemed to me to offer a refreshing view on this founding concept. No doubt other authors should have been associated with this polyphony. My choice was made based on my field of knowledge, reading, relationships and sometimes friendships. One of the limitations of my perception of possibilities resides in language: there are languages to which I do not have access, and there are surely essential publications on this topic that remain unknown to me. I can only hope that readers' reception, reactions and contributions make it possible to publish a Volume II!

I liked the diversity of perspectives opened up by these twenty-odd authors; I liked the variety of gateways they chose; I liked to see how some of them returned to some of our sources, such as psychoanalysis or pragmatism, to open up new perspectives, and how others broadened their scope by bringing in approaches from neighboring disciplines (such as phenomenology, object relations theory, spirituality and aesthetics).

With the exception of three of them, all the texts presented here are studies that have been specially written for this book. Three authors whose importance goes without saying (Erving Polster, Gary Yontef and George Wollants) were not able to contribute to this work. Instead, they asked me to choose excerpts from some of their earlier writings, which I have done, after submitting my selection to them and receiving their approval.

Within a polyphonic choir, the different voices are grouped together: the basses are in one section, the tenors in another, the sopranos have their own, and so on. Here, grouping chapters more or less thematically would have struck me as deeply reductive; such a choice might also have risked orienting the work's message, which I did not wish to do (aside from selecting the contributors!). So I chose to go by alphabetical order… but to avoid reactivating our school-related traumas, I opted for the alphabetical order of the authors' first names, which is less often used.

In doing so, I hope to get closer to the spirit of our founders, who hoped that each of us would appropriate their proposals, far from any idea of orthodoxy or a single-minded approach. The singers are distributed in space; the orchestra provides backing with the score composed by Perls, Hefferline and Goodman; they improvise; they create, responding to each other, completing one another, converging and diverging. There are no soloists.

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1.

Carmen VÁZQUEZ BANDÍN

"Like a river flowing, passing, yet ever present"[1]

The Theory of Self in Gestalt Therapy

Introduction

When I decided to translate and publish in Spanish our foundational book *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the human personality* (hereinafter *PHG*) I knew that I faced a difficult task. However, I never thought that it would change my way of seeing the world and my way of working in psychotherapy so radically.

Having had to seek the meaning of each phrase, each concept, each idea has made me into what I consider a "radical Gestalt therapist". By that, I mean that my basic premises are rooted in our foundational book, and the subsequent elaborations that I develop are based on – and I try to ensure that this is so – our theory of self, which I consider prophetic, revolutionary and very present in this changing world in crisis and in which we live, despite dating from 1951.

It is clear that if *PHG* is the first book on Gestalt Therapy, written by its creators, and is where their statements are to be found, it must be bedside reading for any further development, and for our professional practice.

---

1. "...They say Ulysses, wearied of wonders,/wept with love on seeing Ithaca,/humble and green. Art is that Ithaca,/a green eternity, not wonders./Art is endless like a river flowing,/passing, yet ever present, a mirror to the same/inconstant Heraclitus, who is the same/and yet another, like the river flowing." From "The Art of Poetry", a poem by J.L. Borges.

The main theses that I will develop in this chapter are related to our therapeutic model based on field theory, the self considered as a temporal process, and that we have contacting as our "unit of reference". From these three concepts I have articulated, developed, and built my understanding of the theory of self and, from there, my work as a psychotherapist, supervisor and trainer of future therapists.

Starting from a theory of field

On the first page of chapter one, volume two, of our foundational book, its authors make a fundamental statement:

> Experience occurs at the boundary between the organism and its environment. [...] We speak of the organism contacting the environment, but it is the contact that is the simplest and first reality. (*PHG*, 1951, p. 227)

This statement underlines what we have to follow in order to understand what is to come afterwards in the second part of *PHG*. And what is evident is that it shifts the point of our attention from an individualist paradigm, which focuses on theoretical considerations starting from the individual, to a paradigm about a field formed by the organism and its environment. So our attention should be addressed to the contact-boundary, to the "between".

Just as in most of Europe we use the metre as a unit of measurement and the kilogramme as a unit of weight (although in the British Isles and North America, the mile and pound are used), our approach uses the contact-boundary as the unit of measurement of any consideration of human experience, thus rejecting the individualist paradigm.

However, if we still had any doubt about this deduction, apparently premature, our founders go on to state:

> We have seen that in any biological or socio-psychological investigation, the concrete subject-matter is always an organism/environment field. There is *no* function of any animal that is definable except as a function of such field. Organic physiology, thoughts and emotions, objects and persons, are abstractions that are meaningful only when referred back to interactions of the field. (*PHG*, 1951, p. 372)

In a very individualistic world, this requires a change in our mindset in order to learn to make readings on experience and reality based on a theory of field.

But it is possible. And by doing so, the perspective about Gestalt Therapy's theory of self changes, clearly differentiating it from any other based on an individualistic paradigm as psychoanalysis (Kohut, 1966, 1999; Kernberg, 1977), or on a paradigm of systems such as systemic therapy (Guidano, 1987), and even any inter-relational paradigm (Mitchell and Aron, 1999) or inter-subjective (Sullivan, 1953; Winnicott, 1965; Stern, 1977, 1985; Tronick, 2007).

This is not the place to extend myself on the reasons, qualities and characteristics of Gestalt Therapy's theory of field, but I remit the reader to writings by Parlett (1991, 1997, 2005), Gaffney and O'Neill (2013), Schulz (2013), among others. Suffice to say, as a conclusion of the theory of field, that the contact-boundary is our focus because it is the place, as I mention above, where experience occurs and, according to our founders, "let us call the 'self' the system of contacts in any moment" (*PHG*, 1951, p. 235) and "we consider the self as the function of contacting the actual transient present" (*PHG*, 1951, p. 371), the self being "the contact-boundary at work; its activity is forming figures and grounds" (*PHG*, 1951, p. 235), "deploying [this] activity as a temporal process" (*PHG*, 1951, p. 371) between the organism and its environment.

What is the self in Gestalt Therapy?

Once we have based the self as a function of the organism/environment field, responsible for synthesizing and integrating[2] our experience, we need to ask ourselves whether the self is a "thing" as maintained by psychoanalysis or a potentiality of field (Vázquez, 2010, 2013) that unfolds in a temporal process or sequence when an organism contacts with its environment, resulting in an experience in which both have been co-participants and co-creators.

> The self is the power that forms the gestalt in the field; or better, the self *is* the figure/background process in contact-situations. (*PHG*, 1951, p. 374)

I would like to highlight some properties and nuances in our concept of self:

- The self is a temporal process whose function is "finding and making the meanings that we grow by" (*PHG*, 1951, p. 235)

2. "But the self is precisely the integrator; it is the *synthetic* unity, as Kant said. It is the artist of life. It is only a small factor in the total organism/environment interaction, but it plays the crucial role of finding and making the meanings that we grow by", *PHG*, 1951, p. 235.

- It is not something fixed and stable but it "is flexibly various, for it varies with the dominant organic needs and the pressing environmental stimuli; it is the system of responses; it diminishes in sleep when there is less need to respond" (*PHG*, 1951, p. 235)

- This potentiality we call self is the self-regulation of the field (*PHG*, 1951, p. 373), "urged" by the intentionality of contacting (Robine, 2006; Spagnuolo, 2011).

- It is a phenomenon or function of field that unfolds in "a sequence of grounds and figures as follows [...]: forecontact, contacting, final contact and post-contact" (*PHG*, 1951, p. 403).

- It has five tools or skills (confluence, introjection, projection, retroflection and egotism) (*PHG*, 1951, p. 451-457). The essential function of the self is to make creative adjustments (*PHG*, 1951, p. 247), and among its qualities, to be spontaneous, "middle in mode" and engaged with the situation. (*PHG*, 1951, p. 376)

- It has three main partial systems: id, ego and personality (*PHG*, 1951, p. 371).

Comparing the self of different approaches

As the basic proposals regarding the self formulated by other approaches are completely different, therefore making them tricky to reconcile, a comparative table of the characteristics of self according to Gestalt Therapy theory versus other therapeutic approaches might be useful to give an overview of the differences and originality of our approach.

The self according to Gestalt Therapy	**The self according to other therapeutic approaches**
It is a function of the field	It is an intrapsychic instance
It is a function of contacting	It is individual and personal
It is the figure-ground formation	
It is the phenomenon of contact-boundary and belongs to O and E	It is a "thing" that has "edges"
It is spontaneous and flexible	It is stable
It is in middle mode	It is otiose
It is a temporal process	It is spatial
It seeks novelty	It is thoroughly attentive
It is a small, but fundamental, factor in the O/E interaction	It is identified with the transpersonal and spiritual
It gives the meaning of experience	It gives "nobleness" to human being
It is ecological and holistic	It is individualistic and isolationist

Confirmed by the neurosciences

There is not enough space in this brief chapter to make a thorough study of how the current findings in the neurosciences seem to confirm the hypothesis our founders raised about the self, understood as a flexible temporal process that synthesizes experience, gives meanings to our lives, and that from the "id of the situation" unfolds, giving shape to a figure in a "we" to end up later in individualization and individuality with the assimilation of shared experience, as I will explain below.

As a sample of studies in neurosciences, I would cite some of the conclusions that Damasio (2010) provides in *Self Comes to Mind*. In his search to find an explanation for the conscious mind and consciousness, he states that, with regard to the self as a process:

> In brief, our only direct view of the mind depends on a part of that very mind, self process that we have good reason to believe cannot provide a comprehensive and reliable account of what is going on (Damasio, 2010, p. 20).

And also supporting the Gestalt hypothesis of temporality, and the flexibility of self, we could say that, in consciousness processes,

> [It] is the conspicuous absence of a conductor *before* the performance begins, although, as the performance unfolds, conductor comes into being. For all intents and purposes, a conductor is now leading the orchestra, although the performance has created the conductor—the self—not the other way around. [...] The conductor undeniably exists [...] and nothing is gained by dismissing it as an illusion (Damasio, 2010, p. 28). [It] is that the score and the conductor become reality only as life unfolds (Damasio, 2010, p. 29)... looking for experience and its meaning.

Contacting, the activity of the self

No one has ever seen a self. As Gestalt therapists are phenomenologists, i.e., we work with whatever our senses give us, the aesthetic criteria and the diagnosis/intervention inherent to our approach (*PHG*, 1951; Bloom, 2004, 2009; Robine, 2006; Francesetti and Gecele, 2009; Vázquez, 2014) are derived from that. What we must therefore address is "the self at work", the unfolding

of the self at its various moments, namely, pre-contact, contacting, final contact and post-contact.

As Laura Perls (1992) stated, our approach should never have been called Gestalt therapy (the therapy of the figure), but *Gestaltung* – Gestalt*ing* – therapy (forming of figures) or *Contacting therapy*. Therapist and patient start from the "fog" or "id of situation" (*PHG*, 1951, p. 403; Robine, 2002; Vázquez, 2008; Wollants, 2012), co-creating contacting in an upward spiral of excitation and mutual involvement forming the figure and giving way to fulfilment of the need in the here-and-now, and as a further result, experience and growth.

It is important to bear in mind that "the energy for the figure-formation comes from both poles of the field, both the organism and the environment." (*PHG*, 1951, p. 403). This needs clarification: In the clinical Gestalt setting, patient and therapist are co-creators – fifty percent each – of the experience and involvement in forming of the figure. This leads me to conclude (Vázquez, 2008) that Gestalt therapy is one based on an egalitarian – not equal – relationship in a symmetric encounter, obviously with different functions. Laura Perls reminds us of this when she states:

> A *therapist applies himself* in and to a situation with whatever life experience and professional skills have become assimilated and integrated as his background, which give meaning to his and the patient's present awareness (L. Perls, 1992, p. 133).

Patient and therapist are *different* functions of the *same* field and it implies different activities, but both are elements of the same field they co-create. "The relationship of contract is not so much taken on as a duty, as a development of the feeling for symmetry", as *PHG* states (*PHG*, 1951, p. 303).

The ideal sequence

Our founders, in our basic text, give us the guidelines and keys to understanding how the self unfolds, how it is the sequence of self in action in an ideal situation. It is true that they did not give many details, nor did they do it in an orderly fashion. On studying the text, these keys are scattered throughout the whole and in each chapter. In my opinion, this intellectual obscurity is intentional since in the *Introduction* they clarify:

> Thus the reader is apparently confronted with an impossible task: to understand the book he must have the "Gestaltist" mentality, and to

> acquire it he must understand the book. Fortunately, the difficulty is far from being unsurmountable, for the authors have not invented such a mentality (*PHG*, 1951, p. viii). [...] This book has many functions. [...] A mere Reading will achieve little. It might even leave you with a feeling of confronting a big and hopeless task. [...] After a first Reading you will have decided whether you have benefited enough from your first approach and you can start on a systematic chewing through of the theoretical part. (*PHG*, 1951, p. xiii).

We all know that Fritz Perls (1976) did not like introjection[3]. Understanding contacting requires an effort to de-structuration and assimilation, without forgetting that we must frame it in a field theory.

My conclusions, applied to the Gestalt therapy setting, and in brief, are as follows:

- The patient (P) comes to session, session after session with an issue "for" the therapist (T). The issue is not the figure. We are at the start of pre-contact where what matters is "the 'given'" or "the id of experience" (*PHG*, 1951, p. 429). Thanks to the intentionality of contacting there is the beginning of a "tuning" of the excitement in the here-and-now between patient and therapist. The micro/macro-movements start this "assembly" that, as the excitement increases, gives way to sensations in the here-and-now. Dialogue is the background of the situation and the vehicle of this tuning.

> *Luis[4], after saying hello in the waiting room, enters the therapy room and, as always, seems hesitant merely about sitting down. With a monotonous and weary voice, he is an eternal "I-don't-know" as well as not being very communicative. He does not know what he wants, he does not know how he feels ... With him I feel empty and dull ... But today, it strikes me how he sits on the chair and especially how he rests (or rather does not rest) his feet on the ground. All of him seems to float, not venturing to let the chair support him. Only the tips of his shoes touch the ground. I pay attention to my posture and my breathing, and then I tell him, "I'm going to propose an experiment ... let's both sit back in our chairs, resting our backs on the backrest, well supported,*

3. For example: "The psychological foods with which the outside world presents us has to be assimilated. [...] If it is merely swallowed whole, it contributes not at all to the development of our personalities", Perls, F. (1973, p. 34)

4. Obviously, altough the patient's name is changed and the description of the session is very brief it summarizes, in a way, what I am saying theoretically.

and then I am backwards and forward several times ... and see what happens to us, what we become aware of".

We do so for a while. He, in a natural way, has rectified his posture. His feet are now well supported, his breathing is less strained. Colour comes to his face and his eyes sparkle as he looks at how I sway with the rhythm of our swing. He laughs and says, "What fun!"... "Pleasant or unpleasant?" I ask. He does not hesitate a moment, "Nice!" And we stop, naturally, our movement.

The Sensation (for both P and T) gives way to contacting, the actual psychological part (*PHG*, 1951, p. xii), to the Emotion that, in turn, increases the excitement through involvement and commitment to the situation, and support from I (support for the situation, not the speech of the patient) leads to the Feeling.

Something seems to appear in Luis' mind and his face changes, he goes pale again and his eyes fade. "I think that something has gone through your mind and you moved away from here, from what we were doing, from me." "Yes"... There is a brief silence ... "I was thinking when I was a little boy and played swings with my sister ... now nothing is as before ... now ..." (silence).

We know that Feeling has a functional attribute, that is, it gives us the Meaning of what is happening to us in the here-and-now of the situation. This Meaning speaks about the need at that moment. The need, complementary and shared (Vazquez, 2008) between P and I gives us the Figure that determines the action. It is the peak of excitation and synchronization (tuning).

"Now?" I encourage him to continue. "Now ... I'm lonely, I have nobody to share these things with ...! To share anything." His eyes fill with tears. It is the first time that he verbalizes his loneliness, which he shares with me. "What have I done to make you feel lonely?" I ask. "You didn't do anything. It's me who doesn't know how to relate to others. That's why I prefer not to take an interest in anything or anybody. That way I don't suffer."

Luis collapses again in the chair. His eyes no longer have tears or seem unfocused.

Final contact is a co-created and shared action that blends us into a "we". Once the need has been satisfied and the excitement diminished, "differentiation" emerges, allowing the I and You and the separation we know as post-contact. Excitement runs out giving way again to confluence with the background.

"Hey!" I say to him, moving one hand in front of his eyes. He looks at me again and once again his eyes fill with tears. "I would like to accompany you in this moment of suffering, to share this moment with you ... if you let me ..." He reaches out his arms and we grasp each other's hands ... "Shared loneliness is much lighter ..." he says. I say nothing. "Well!" he says, "actually, shared loneliness isn't loneliness!" And his face and eyes light up again. Then we talked about what has realized, his new discoveries.

A simplified graphical[5] representation would be:

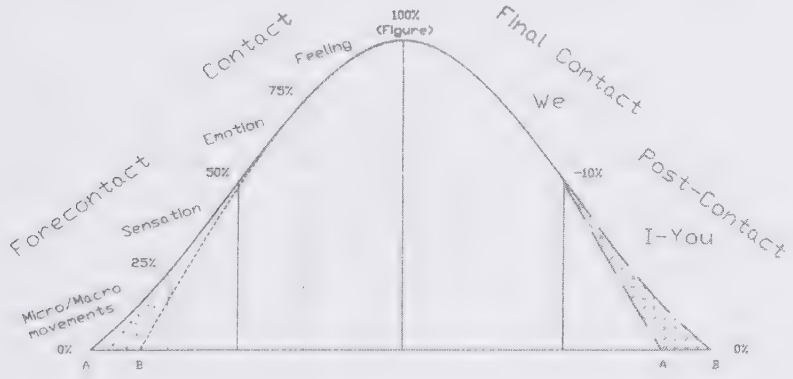

Figure 1.- A simplified graphical representation of Contacting

Interruptions/modifications in contacting and contact patterns or styles

"Neurosis, too, is part of human nature", says our seminal text (*PHG*, 1951, p. 310). It also defines neurosis as "the premature pacification of conflicts" (*PHG*, 1951, p. 360). This premature pacification carried out by the competences of self (*PHG*, 1951, p. 248) enters into action as a creative adjustment in a difficult situation at any given time, disrupting the formation of the figure. Thus, contact "changes" and becomes rigid in fixed *Gestalten* or automatisms[6] (*PHG*, 1951, p. ix; L. Perls, 1992, p. 85 and 138), or in a lack of shaping the figure.

5. I want to thank Susana Fernández Rubio for her kind help with this figure for this chapter.

6. "Any fixed gestalt in time becomes a block", L. Perls, 1992.

> In neurosis, and much more in psychosis, the elasticity of figure/ground formation is disturbed. We often find either a rigidity (fixation) or a lack of figure formation (repression). Both interfere with the habitual completion of an adequate Gestalt. (*PHG*, 1951, p. ix)

Depending on the skill of the self used to modify contacting, we can find different types of "pacification", of suffering in contact-boundary (*PHG*, 1951, p. 451), or contact patterns (Vázquez, 2008, 2014), i.e., a specific skill comes to the foreground as a creative adjustment, no longer as awareness.

Because each of the skills of self used as a way to "modify" contacting is not at any stage of contacting, nor in an arbitrary manner, they have their location in a specific place of the sequence.

According to *PHG*:

> The difference in types consists in whether the interruption occurs:
> (1) Before the new primary excitation. Confluence.
> (2) During the excitation. Introjection.
> (3) Confronting the environment. Projection.
> (4) During the conflict and destroying. Retroflection.
> (5) At final contact. Egotism. (*PHG*, 1951, p. 451)

Thus, we can speak about patterns that are confluent, introjecting, projecting, retroflecting and egotist (Vázquez, 2010; Spagnuolo, 2013), each of them having their own characteristics and their own forms of suffering. Suffering is at the contact-boundary, in the field.

Suffering

Even if "the formation of complete and comprehensive Gestalten is the condition of mental health and growth [...] Any incomplete or fixed Gestalt [...] clamours for attention and interferes with the formation of any novel, vital Gestalt. Instead of growth and development we then find stagnation and regression" (*PHG*, 1951, p. ix). The above is the quintessential clinical situation. Some people, using different styles of contacting (Robine, 2012; Spagnuolo, 2011; Vázquez, 2008, 2014), depending on their creative adjustments which have become obsolete, may go to therapy suffering from different symptoms because their styles of contacting cause them suffering and "starvation", emotional and relational "anemia".

Once again, the capacities of self in contacting (confluence, introjection, projection, retroflection and egotism) are used creatively in recurrent difficult situations, learning to modify contacting at any of its moments; This creates rigidity in the contact structure, becoming fixed. It thus becomes an obsolete contact – an automatism –, disappearing from awareness. There is contacting but it is impoverished. And the contact structure becomes a contact pattern[7] (Vázquez, 2010, 2014).

Our task as psychotherapists is to offer the patient the safe space and experiential situation to be able to go beyond his/her style of contacting, through experiment, in order to dissolve and make more flexible the fixed *Gestalten* and to be able to live as fully as possible every here-and-now of his/her life.

The therapeutic work is not to "make" contacting, "pushing" the patient or forcing him/her to go beyond his/her lifestyle. Nor is it to analyze the content giving lectures or advice. Neither is it to frustrate him/her so that the result is an acting out. Nor is it to praise him/her or support him/her in all his/her behaviour so that he/she feels understood.

Every therapy session is a sincere and genuine encounter between patient and therapist in which the presence, commitment and involvement of both allow, through experiments, what was once rigid to become flexible risks letting ourselves be "seen", and where the aesthetic criteria (*PHG*, 2002; Bloom, 2009, 2013; Robine, 2012; Vázquez, 2014) are a fundamental part of the process. At the same time, the therapist analyzes the structure of the process.

As *PHG* states:

> The therapy, then, consists in analyzing the internal structure of the actual experience, with whatever degree of contact it has: not so much *what* is being experienced, remembered, done, said, etc., as *how* what is being remembered is remembered, or how what is said is said, with what facial expression, what tone of voice, what syntax, what posture, what omission, what regard or disregard of the other person, etc. By working on the unity and disunity of this structure of the experience here and now, it is possible to remake the dynamic relations of the figure and ground until the contact is heightened, the awareness brightened and the behavior energized. Most important of all, *the achievement of a*

7. *PHG* distinguishes between "structure" and "pattern". The "structure" is "the organization or the order of the different parts of different phenomena constantly changes," for example, our concept of contact-boundary. The "pattern" would be a structure that hardly changes, or which changes very slowly, e.g., "the stereotyped patterns limiting the flexible process of creatively addressing the novel" (*PHG*, 1951, p. 231). See Vázquez Bandín, C.: "El diagnóstico y la Terapia Gestalt", in *Buscando las palabras para decir*, Madrid, Ed. Sociedad de cultura Valle-Inclán, colección Los Libros del CTP, 2008, pp. 53-80.

> *strong gestalt is itself the cure, for the figure of contact is not a sign of, but is itself the creative integration of experience.* (*PHG*, 1951, p. 232; italics in the original.)

And also, as Laura Perls states:

> Therapy in itself is an *innovative process* in which patient and therapist continually discover themselves and each other and ongoingly invent their relationship. (L. Perls, 1992, p. 134).

The psychotherapy process is therefore, in itself, a creative adjustment, which is brought about by the therapist's skills and training in Gestalt Therapy. It is the Gestalt therapist who seeks the support of the theory and theoretical learning, while creativity[8] involves the unfolded novelty in each here-and-now of the setting in which the therapist proposes experiments[9] that co-create situations rich in possibilities to go beyond the "known" and stereotyped rigidities.

Process diagnosis and therapy

Therapy is not a set of "separate" sessions based on each here-and-now of the meeting. Nor is it a rigid process in which the therapist follows the steps designed prior to the session to force the flexibility of each encounter. Our seminal text also clarifies this:

> The diagnosis and the therapy are the same process. (*PHG*, 1951, p. 449)

We need to distinguish, then, as Francesetti and Gecele (2009), remind us, that in Gestalt Therapy we can make two types of diagnosis/intervention, the extrinsic (guided by a map), and intrinsic (aesthetic, in which our senses guide us).

> Extrinsic diagnosis involves comparison between a phenomenon and a phenomenon model. [...] It is based on a foreknowledge of territory which can be useful for orientation and for calming the anxiety that arises

8. This combination of skills/theory and creativity is what training programs usually offer. That is, the theory, practice and self-awareness are key and fundamental elements.

9. I want to emphasize that the word is "experiment", not "exercise". Gestalt therapists propose experiments, i.e., activities in which what matters is the process, how it develops. In an exercise, the interest would be the finality, the goal that is known in advance.

> in encounters with the unknown (p. 11). [Intrinsic diagnosis] emerges from moment to moment from the contact boundary. Instant after instant, interactions between the therapist and the client unpredictably and chaotically. (2009, p. 15)

When I speak of extrinsic criteria, I am not referring to the use of a standard diagnostic manual (*DSM*, *ICD*, etc.) to categorize the patient or problem, but the use of our basic theory rooted in a theory of field. In the first session - and session after session – it is useful to analyze our encounter or take notes about what has elapsed. In that analysis we will use Gestalt Therapy theory to focus our sessions. It is useful to recall here that, in therapy, we seek not to remove the symptom or problem since this is "the tip of the iceberg" of suffering, but work to make the contact-boundary in action more flexible for the following step. Our therapy is based on the "future", on what is to come. Unlike psychoanalysis, we do not rummage in the past, nor modify behavior, like the behaviorists. This flexibility at the contact-boundary will dissolve suffering and with it, the problem.

Every therapy session is based on the phenomenological, on the use of our senses (intrinsic criterion) following a thread (extrinsic to the session) that guides the framework of our interventions. We could say that the background is the theory of self, and the figure is the senses and phenomenological. Not forgetting that the therapist is his/her only instrument.

Closing

Many of the ideas presented above require further development and explanation but, as I mentioned, this is not the place.

As a summary and synthesis of all this, I would like to highlight what is fundamental to my way of understanding the self in Gestalt Therapy and my understanding of psychotherapy.

- To do Gestalt psychotherapy we obviously base ourselves on our original theory, contained in the basic and primary text, *PHG*
- This theory focuses on a theory of the self based on a field theory, considering the self as a temporal process and, given its phenomenological character, it leads us to observe the self-at-work.
- This self-at-work guides our attention to the contact-boundary, to the co-creation of experience between an organism (patient) and its environment (therapist) in each here-and-now
- Our therapeutic interest is therefore the co-creation and analysis of the

contact-boundary and its vicissitudes

- From the above points we can deduce all other aspects, features and developments of our theory, such as a Gestalt anthropology, a psychotherapeutic model, a psychopathology or suffering in the "between", a theory of development, etc.

Gestalt therapy is a young approach, only sixty-three years old. Our founders gave us the keys and guidelines from which to develop our model. The task is very wide-ranging and very exciting. And while the temptation to import techniques and explanations from other models is strong, a Gestalt therapist who believes that "the Gestalt outlook is the original, undistorted, natural approach to life, that is, to man's thinking, acting, feeling" (*PHG*, 1951, p. viii) obviously owes a debt of gratitude based on loyalty and faithfulness, not on an introjection at any cost. That requires us to stick to our theoretical principles, deconstructing each concept in order to take it further because, as From and Miller stated[10]:

> Gestalt Therapy, taken seriously, offers no cure for all the problems that humans fall prey to by the simple fact of inheriting the human condition. It offers no passage back through the gates of Eden. But, as psychoanalysis had once promised, it can help one learn to live better in a fallen world. (1994)

I could not have put it better.

10. From, I. and Miller, M. V. (1964): "Introduction to the Gestalt Journal Edition of Gestalt Therapy", in Perls, F.S., Hefferline, R. and Goodman, P. (1994). *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality*. Highland: The Gestalt Journal Press.

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2.

Claudia BAPTISTA TÁVORA

« Because the world is round, it turns me on »
Self as the Form-Content Interface in Contemporary Clinical Practice

> *"Human nature, essentially changeable, unstable as the dust, can endure no restraint; if it binds itself it soon begins to tear madly at its bonds, until it rends everything asunder, the wall, the bonds and its very self." (Franz Kafka)*

In a story called *"The Great Wall of China"*, Kafka describes one of the many legends to which the building of the wall gave rise, namely the assertion that, due to the way it was built, some gaps in the wall had never been finished at all. As different groups of workers had to accomplish separate stretches of the wall in different neighborhood at different periods of time, many great gaps were left, which could only be filled in gradually and bit by bit – if ever. Since the wall was intended to be a protection against the nomad people of the north, Kafka asks *"But how can a wall protect if it is not a continuous structure?"* and claims that *"Not only cannot such a wall protect, but what there is of it is in perpetual danger."*

The story is narrated from the perspective of one of the wall builders. The narrator weaves details about the construction, describing information about the method used, the determining motives, and how the workers were recruited and treated. At the same time, he sets forth intriguing questions. In addition to presenting doubts about the purpose of protection, the narrative points to the unfinished condition of the construction and to the fact that its enormity

prevented any one person from being able to verify the entire thing at once with their own eyes. However, presuming that the decisions would be made by *'high command'*, the narrator advises:

> *"Try with all your might to comprehend the decrees of the high command, but only up to a certain point; then avoid further meditation."*

Like in most of his short stories, Kafka presents a sort of circular narrative, and we have the impression that there is not much progression in the story. Charged with ambiguity, the text seems to represent the construction itself, precisely because of its nonlinear narrative.

In the contemporary world, the "facts" of conflict and war simultaneously precede and surpass physical frontiers. Walls become obsolete, practically naïve images of protection against an enemy that is not always identifiable. Some well-known walls of as much historical importance as the one mentioned here have been already demolished in revolutions or as political acts. Even so, this short story can still inspire our imagination and stimulate thought. As demonstrated in the little conclusive comment made by the narrator about the legitimacy and propriety of choices and decisions allegedly made at a higher hierarchical level of society, thus outside of individual perception and of the common sense: *"in that office one may be certain that all human thoughts and desires were revolved, and counter to them all human aims and fulfillments"*.

What inaccessible place is this where all human thoughts and desires circulate, and in the opposite direction of all human objectives and achievements?

The story summarized here brings into social cohesion and also sets forth a reflection about this separation between "we" and "they", the civilized and the barbarians, nationals and foreigners, adults and children, workers and legislators, and other divisions that delimit identities, each of these identities being defined as: distinguished from and opposed to another - in other words an opposition to alterity or otherness. For if the binary polarization "I X you" (or "me" X "other") worked in the constitution of the Western subject – and the subject of psychology – it did so by crystallizing each pole as a species of essentialized - absolute. Notwithstanding, attempts to control the permeability and miscegenation of the frontiers that still take place today prove to be limited. Terrorist actions and antiterrorist discourse seem to ignore that the condition for the development of psychic life is based on the contradiction between poles, and that subjects can also constitute themselves in the in-between or in itinerancy. What would be said of the American people without the participation of the African-Americans,

the Latinos, the Europeans, the Jews, the Native Americans etc.? Would it be possible to speak of Brazilian culture without its diversity and rhythmic, musical and religious blend? What about phenomenologically and field oriented psychotherapists without their criticism of psychoanalysts, behaviorist, organicist psychiatrists and purist scientists? What would be of seriousness and reason without histrionics and madness? And of health without illness, considering its contribution to the understanding of (desirable) healthy functioning?

Thus, we can observe that the issue of social cohesion does not distance us from the theme of the present work. To the contrary, it confronts us with the originality and radicalness of the clinical and social project implicit in the proposal of Gestalt Therapy (see Távora, 1994). More objectively, it points to the issue of cohesion of personality and to the investment made in the notion of "self", as an attempt to understand the emergence of the experience of oneself in the living world (see Távora, 2009). This initial radical attitude came to oppose and to challenge formulations of relationality in terms of "influence" or "communication". The "social" aspect, "sociability", and "society" were considered first and primary in the original systematizing of Gestalt Therapy, as follows: *"The bearer of what most anthropologists would consider the defining property of mankind, culture, the social inheritance surviving the generations."* (Perls, Hefferline & Goodman, 1977/1951, p. 368) Then in the chapter on *"Human nature and the anthropology of neurosis"* the authors state that:

> *"it is deceptive to think of the 'individuals' as primitive and combined in social relations, for there is no doubt that the existence of 'individuals' comes about as the result of a very complicated society. (....) Again, 'persons' are reflections of an interpersonal whole, and 'personality' is best taken as a formation of the self by a shared social attitude."* (p. 368-369)

This was certainly a unique proposal that claimed for the wholeness of the organism/environment field. In this proposal the differentiation of the individual is considered as already a late development. As in this statement:

> *"That is, we may think of the sequence (a) preverbal social relations of the organism, (b) the formation of a verbal personality in the organism/environment field, (c) the subsequent relations of this personality with the others."* (p. 375)

We know that for the sake of an individual's health, it is desirable that this sequence should be flexible, open and creative throughout the process, which suggests the need to cultivate habits that would help what is preverbal to flow

freely. We also know that the whole process implies learning from others, and being, thus, permanently altered by contact. Since experience occurs on the boundary between organism and environment, the fundamental place for psychological experience is contact itself.

Robine (2006b) defines contact explaining that if contact is one of the operations contained in the act of relating, a relationship can be approached on the one hand as the result of contacting as well as its return, and on the other hand, as a form of progressive sedimentation of contact events, which presumes temporality (p. 203-204).

Going back to Kafka's social metaphor, we can check again how much sense it makes regarding psychological and theoretical "walls". As psychotherapists interested in contemporary issues we certainly have to consider all levels of human experience as "real" aspects of self and not only abstractions from it. "Personality" would be not more than one of the aspects of self, one of its possible structures. And cohesion would imply ability to access not only "personality" but also the so-called "ego" and "id" as the other functions of self present in contacting process. Integrity of self, then, would be far from fixed stability, implying permanent change (see Távora, 2014). As Spagnuolo Lobb (2001) states:

> *"The stress that Perls et al. (1951) placed on relationality, then, is connected with the relationship between organism and environment at the* anthropological level and thus with the relationship between individual and society at the sociopolitical *level."* (p. 280)

Of course the social and anthropological nature of people and of relationality engenders a conflicting field for human life. So that it is likely that at all times in history there are irreconcilable conflicts between desirable individual expression and reasonable social harmony. At this point Perls, Hefferline & Goodman argue that this is not supposed to be a necessary obstacle to life and to therapy. They advise us:

> *"On the other hand, it is also likely (even if the different likelihoods are contradictory) that these 'irreconcilable' conflicts have always been, not only at present, the human condition; and that the attendant suffering and motion toward an unknown solution are the grounds of human excitement."* (p. 372-373) *Even more, the true work to be done, perhaps even the true vocation, is first being discovered in the conflict (...) The conflict is a collaboration going beyond what is intended, toward a new figure altogether."* (p. 416)

Already, we can set forth the issue of this chapter, about the meaning, applicability and pertinence of using the notion of self in Gestalt therapy, as well as some problems derived from such use in contemporary clinical practice, in the hopes of presenting some interesting topics for discussion.

Self as the diagnostic-conceptual interface with reality: "*me, myself and I*"

> *"Where do we find ourselves? In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none."* (R. W. Emerson)

Some verbal difficulties in Gestalt Therapy theory were already pointed out by Perls, Hefferline & Goodman: *"'man', 'person, 'self', 'individual', 'human animal', 'organism', are sometimes interchangeable, sometimes necessary to distinguish".* (p. 368) Among these, "self" needs further attention, as it is the object of the present discussion.

With no doubt it is desirable that the language used in theoretical formulation carry the same coherent, original integration of the studied function or concept.

Let us start by considering the more colloquial use of the term. In English, self is described as *"one's own personality", "a person's nature, special qualities", "the type of person you are, your character, your typical behaviour"* (Oxford Dictionary of Current English, 1978, p. 788; Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, p. 1487).

We can observe that this colloquial usage emphasizes only one of the aspects of self as it is understood by *Gestalt Therapy*, the one related to either presumed or consented perceptions and identifications. Thus in a slightly broader sense, we can arrive at the idea of self as a way in which individuals perceive themselves, give sense to their own experience and organize themselves for life in general. But we need to better describe the term in its processual meaning. We agree with Parlett (2011) that Wheeler has been most successful in this task, since:

> *"Specifically, he has captured, more than other writers have, what 'self-process' means in practice and has found the language needed to communicate it. He does so by taking us back to human experience itself, and into the language of how people describe their process – what we do, how we are, the way we think, and how we make sense of our lives."* (p. 273)

He quotes Wheeler himself to make it clear:

> *"The self we are seeking and finding here, out of our own experience as we feel it (and) live it, it is an active process of scanning, interpreting, feeling and valuing, estimating and predicting, taking action and making meaning out of the whole field, mapping ourselves into that field as we go".* (p. 273)

We have just begun the description of self and we may already be suspicious of this kind of concept. Does it not seem to refer to too many aspects and processes at the same time? As we think of one's self we are led not only to ask ourselves what it looks like but how it works in daily life. The psychological, philosophical and epistemic aspects of self all come together when we look into the language involved in its description, as examined by Toulmin. He identifies three distinguishable concepts or uses of self:

> *"(1) 'self-' and '-self', treated as reflexive, auxiliary prefixes or postfixes in everyday colloquial language; (2) 'self' treated as the name of a hypothetical entity, or intervening explanatory variable, in speculative psychological theories; and (3) 'self' treated as a diagnostic term, in clinical psychotherapy and comparable, non-medical modes of psychological description".* (Toulmin *in* Mischel, 1977, p. 291)

That distinction is developed even further to consider that the initial link between the everyday sense and the clinical-diagnostic sense is closer than the link between the everyday sense and the abstract, theoretical sense. We join this assumption when we consider that the terminology of the self in clinical psychotherapy emphasizes a language of psychic integration and autonomy, in such a way that it is more a practical kind of knowledge. The kind of description of self we use is not strictly intellectual or merely cognitive. As clinical psychologists we arrive at the understanding of self as a result of interacting with our subjects and not as a result of distancing ourselves from the human agents with whom we are in contact. In this approach we make exchanges so that our reading of processes is also affective and volitional. The end of this process is much more than simply conceptual. Our knowledge about ourselves and our human fellows involves a full complex of expectations, belief, hope and trust. It also involves frustration of all these by others, by the environment or by one's own limits. That is why the clinical sense of self is closer to the colloquial currency of reflexive idioms which can provide a base from which, by *"extension of meaning"* we can give a sense of self as a freestanding noun. This extension, as Toulmin suggests, is closer to the reflexive actions and attitudes as expressed in English by the prefixes and postfixes mentioned, and in Greek by the equivalent "auto-".

But as we observe its use in other languages we can find even more complexity. In French the problem of the self may be put in terms not only of the *"moi"* and *"soi"* but also the *"même"*, perhaps even *"moi-même"* and *"soi-même"*. In Portuguese (my own native tongue), language problems range from the use of reflexive pronoun *"si"* to the word *"mesmo"*, for self is often translated as the compound noun *"si mesmo"*. In Spanish, we will find similar questions regarding its use as *"si mismo"*. What comes out in this last use is that *"mesmo"* implies the idea of *"same"* that may suggest equality, uniformity or homogeneity, if not at least permanence. It may also mean a kind of repetition or reinforcement of one's perception of "oneself". But that should not be taken in terms of invariable state or action. That is probably why Perls, Hefferline & Goodman referred to the "middle-mode" in Greek language as the specific way in which self should work and be considered- not active or passive, but middle, establishing the legitimacy of a third, unambiguous status that may be captured grammatically by the use of middle-voice forms.

The few grammatical facts here examined suggest there is no evidence about the nature or existence of an independent self as an "entity" with a role in human action. If not for other reasons, the heterogeneity of these linguistic idioms may warn us against jumping to conclusions about an essential "nature" of self. The diagnostic-descriptive mode of the concept is rather emphasized as *"to mark new complexities and relationships within psychological phenomena that have, in less exact and detailed terms, been long familiar"*. (p. 303)

These phenomena might involve pure reflexive conduct (not in the behaviouristic but in the linguistic sense), where there is no evident separation between "agent" and "patient". And in this case some thing such as "my self" may make no sense at all. Of course this discussion may be even more consistent and exciting if we bring native speakers of different languages to talk together and describe points of contact and distinctions of these expressions in their use in contemporary Gestalt theory and practice.

But anyway, for the time being it is clear enough that self is used in this chapter as an abstract formal concept and not a fixed entity. Moreover, it is also clear that this concept is more diagnostic and instrumental than strictly conceptual and that it does not make any sense to use it as an "inner cause" of human action. On the contrary, it is its effect. But still, not in a deterministic way. Rather, in a way where "I" and "me" alternate, as action and passion of self in contacting process. That is why for years now I write and speak of "self", not preceded by the definite article "the", which makes it sound like some thing – which it is not (Távora, 2009, p. 42).

Self as the identity-alterity interface: "*I, you and it*"

"We all are standing unafraid on the frontier
We all are shadows in the shade on the frontier"
(Renaissance)

The apparently simple idea of self becomes much more complex as we follow the formulation of the theory of self in Perls, Hefferline & Goodman. Self is described *"as the function of contacting the actual transient present"* (p. 433), *"The complex system of contacts necessary for adjustment in the difficult field"* (p. 435). Self is placed at the boundary of the organism, with the explanation that *"the boundary is not itself isolated from the environment; it belongs to both, environment and organism"* (p. 435).

The definition is clear enough as to affirm that:

"The self is not to be thought of as a fixed institution; it exists wherever and whenever there is in fact a boundary interaction." (p. 435) *"In contact situations the self is the power that forms the Gestalt in the field; or better, the self is the figure/background process in contact situations"* (p. 436) and *"exists where there are the shifting boundaries of contact".* (p. 437) *"Self is spontaneous, middle in mode (as the ground of action and passion), and engaged with its situation (as I, You, and It)."* (p. 438)

There seems to be enough precision in these definitions of self in terms of processes and functions of contact. We leave back any supposition of an entity or a pre-existing thing, authentic in "itself". Considering the emphasis of the authors on the point of contact between "the face and the mask", I suggest the term interface.

As a phenomenological boundary event, as a phenomenological boundary ability, self in this sense is easily distinguished from both the intrapsychic Freudian perspective and behaviouristic and systemic approaches, in their understanding of "environmental influences". If not able to make adjustments in the present field, self becomes both fixed and pathologized as much as the whole field does. The psychotherapist will not reach the phenomenological process of self by trying to know the patient's nature in terms of causal determination of his structure or behavior. Once more, as said in a song:

"It's peaceful revolution time to join the day now
Morning breaks the light will shine and find the blind"
(Renaissance)

This relationship between identity and otherness means that self is not only a constructor of the world but also an imaginative self, living in and throughout a world of images fluidly and creatively. Moreover, self is not "self-contained" or "self-referred". It is an active process of organization that integrates the same field with others. Thus, if the tendency is to integrate the relevant field as much as possible, we may conclude that "you" and your "interior life" are part of the material for this integration of self in which the "I" plays a part. (see Wheeler, 2000)

When we mention the imaginative self, I remember a patient, a young man close to getting his degree in engineering. He happens to be very technical and objective in his daily work, relationships, opinions and planning of the future, both professional and personal. This patient often tells me about his imaginings of fictitious situations motivated by simple events in daily life, which for some reason cause him aggravation or in more serious cases, rage. In a recent session he described one of these imagined scenes, motivated by a fact. The police in Rio de Janeiro had killed a drug dealer, one of the biggest and most "important", so the local news said. The criminal had been raised in a middle class family but as a young man he became one of the most important drug lords, therefore being very feared, since fights with other lords always led to violent killings.

The scene starts with one of these statements about the importance and malignity of the dead criminal. The patient quickly moves on to imagining that the criminal had survived and that he (the patient himself) would then be in charge to kill him.

> *- "I am to be feared more than the person the police is talking about. I am to be respected. I will probably succeed in becoming the new drug lord. I am better than that. I am evil."*

If this sounds to the reader like a hallucinatory or delirious thought I might advise that it is far from that. To the contrary, this young man is quite responsible in carrying out his daily routine. What draws my interest is his enormous promptness to voluntarily explore and experience polarities of his own personality, ranging from neatness, correctness and goodness – to speak of the "nice" and personalistic poles of their so-called opposites. He dares to dramatize himself as bad, very bad. However, this is not without a purpose. It is to "feel like" being important, enough to appear in the daily news. Social morals of our times come inside for the session too, represented by the wish to have power. Of course this is just an extract from self process. Lots of questioning would follow, aimed at progressive specification and discrimination while he contacted this imagined evilness, thus bringing forth alternating criticism and identification with parts of the field.

Speaking about self process, look at how much foreign material this young man is able to integrate as we spend an entire session on his badness, his evilness. He is ready to make creative adjustments while experiencing him(self) on the frontiers of right and wrong, good and bad. He goes far enough to remember Edgar Allan Poe's (*"The Tell-Tale Heart"*, 1850) description of the *"evil eye"*, which he refers to the *"evil I"*. What a literate engineer this young man may become!

So we have a great instrument to get into the contemporary talk about self, personal and social narratives based on our own conception. However, there is a problem we must still deal with, namely the one which is considered by some of us to be a "split personality" of the founding book and theory of Gestalt-Therapy (see Miller's *Preface* in Robine, 2004). On one hand, it presents an elaborate and consistent approach to singularity and the creating force of self as lying in the adjustments with the environment. On the other hand, however, in the part of the book dedicated to experiments, the emphasis placed on living the here and now seems more like a stereotyped and standardized attitude, different from what the therapeutic theory and method advocated. This reductionist tendency persists, still engendering many inner conflicts related to theory and method. Self and other conceptions (mostly those related to the association of the theory with phenomenology) must be understood in their full complexity to avoid unreal simplification.

Thus, in order to enliven this discussion and place it in the contradictory reality of life, we ask, much like Kafka's narrator:

What is the point of an unfinished and incomplete concept of self, which depends on contact and relations to define it(self)? And thus, if it cannot even protect that which it intends to contain, is it not endangering the entire structure? Further still, why should we use the term self, which is commonly associated to an identity, if not even this identity is whole, capable of encompassing so much alterity and so many foreign elements within itself? What is the sense of envisaging a concept which knows not of the institution of its order and organization (generated by a whole, invisible to the eyes that does not correspond to the sum of the traditionally known parts)? And worse yet, what is the sense of this when within the set of Gestalt Therapy theory and practice itself, from its origins to contemporaneity, we perceive this division in personality, which can even imply contradiction of method and objective? Last, but not least, what if by means of our unique conception of self we end up conceiving people, – and ourselves – also as composed of characteristics that may be as "dangerous" as those belonging to the strangers we fear?

We confront these issues with the question: for what reason, in favor of what, against what, for whom and against whom do we build our theoretical walls? Does the theory aim in fact to be a wall or does it seek to be a crossing point for subjectivity and its creative processes conceived as self? As declared by Perls, Hefferline & Goodman in a statement that could very well dialogue with Kafka's narrator: *"If the theory is often confusing and ambiguous, it may be that the nature too is confusing and ambiguous."* (p. 369)

Open, failing closures, although not conclusively understandable as they may seem, constructions of self still appear to many of us as all that we can access in psychotherapy and all that there is to invest any help in. Just as if being someone and having the freedom to come and go - or even to change positions or places — could not be separate in human circumstances of life, where frontiers between parts and functions are important along with frontiers at the belonging contexts.

"- What are your dreams?
- Simple things:
An address, a stamp, an identity, a passport"
(Dialog between Arab man and Palestinian woman
first meeting in Tel Aviv)
(*"L'attentat"*, a film by Ziad Doueiri, 2012)

Self as the socio-ability and self-ability interface

At this point in the discussion, it is even clearer that self as we consider it in this chapter is not a fixed figure representative of an entity. On the contrary, it may be described as a diagnostic-instrumental field concept. It can be applied as a special "ability of the human organism in contact", as able to make contact with its environment, spontaneously and deliberately. Being able to contact is both the means and the end of self.

In this sense, self is not suitable for direct correspondence with identity – if identity is thought of as an *a priori*. Self is not a thing once and forever given as itself. It is a complex temporal construction. It is an important ongoing and self-transforming definition of one's identity.

So in order to describe it we may need to design a very special path of theory combined with epistemology and philosophy, using forms of language that

will often remind literature, poetry or ethics. At times this path might seem aesthetical more than scientific – and this is actually the proposal of authors like Robine (2006) and Alvim (in Robine, 2006). If the advocates of science find there is too little precision in this conception to face contemporary dilemmas, they should be reminded that human life and problems call for our reason but also for our senses, sensibility, intuition, imagination, all of them necessary to help cognition fit its purpose. When we talk about people we are talking not about a thing, but about *"extended events which distribute themselves and regulate themselves as functional wholes"* (Köhler, 1970, p. 178).

We are attracted by "definitive" definitions. The idea of a "whole" and a "totality" is seductive and at the same time configures itself as enigmatic when we seek to understand open totalities with no outlines. Thus, here we take a stand with relation to the existing interpretations in Gestalt Therapy to criticize the dominance we still suffer of geometric images of totality, identity and self. These geometric images persist as mental models and expand into theoretical images as ideal frameworks of possible organization in space that do not contribute to the conception of self as considered here.

Not even Gestalt Therapy as has already been described here, split or contradictory, can be represented in geometric form. The Gestalt psychologist states that the assumption that *'Gestalten', i.e.*, segregated entities, exist outside the organism and simply extend or project themselves into the nervous system is entirely wrong. In this case, he suggests the application of the functional principle of Gestalt psychology itself which is embedded in the expression *"relative position of processes"*. This expression *"must always be understood in terms of functional rather than of purely geometrical relationships"* (p. 209).

It is true that most of the time, our culture leads us to think in black and white, i.e., in terms of disjunction, contrast and exclusion, as if all boundaries were rigid and thick - and not (dis)articulated and alive. We think in terms of this or that. But in life, as in art, rarely do the wholes organize themselves in equal parts, but instead as equivalences of unequal parts each in their own position and with different levels of tension, constituting multiple levels of meaning.

Furthermore, people are much more a composition of autonomy and inter-dependency, self- and hetero-esteem, partiality and integrity.

Thus, in therapy, we seek to work with the idea of a wholeness that operates as mutually sane, organic, and progressive, integrating different functions and parts

of an entirety whose boundaries are open and fluctuating. Therefore, individual, group and even theoretical identities can be conceived as a "combination of participations around one or several oppositions" that must be treated in their specificity. In this way, a "totality" that does not intend to be either abstract or arbitrary can contain dual relationships of both identity and opposition without this taking away from the legitimacy of such totality.

How do we deal with relational conflicts according to this perspective of self? Parlett considers that *"to empower the self of some identity group by disempowering others is maybe still an individualistic proposal"*. He brings in Wheeler again to affirm that *"I'm me and you're you"* which needs balancing with *"I'm you and you're me – or us"*. Because both statements may be true at different times (or at the same time) in different ways (p. 278).

The metaphor in the short story presented at the beginning of this chapter, about the construction of the Great Wall of China, may be used to refer to the intervals, gaps and discontinuities of the boundaries of self as an interface with openings on all sides, infiltrated by pores, subverted from its core by alterity, whether it comes from afar or is installed in our heart. As stated in the Brazilian poem "Quadrilha" (Square Dance):

> ***"John loved Teresa who loved Raimundo***
> ***who loved Maria who loved Joaquim who loved Lili***
> ***who loved no one.***
> ***John went to the United States, Teresa to the convent,***
> ***Raimundo died in a disaster, Maria never married,***
> ***Joaquim killed himself and Lili married J. Pinto Fernandes***
> ***Who had not been introduced to the story."***
> (Carlos Drummond de Andrade)

Self is the process of contacting the concrete transient present. Self is the current organization of components and of the diverse relationships that are its constituent and integrative parts. Thus, Mr. J. Pinto Fernandes is an expression of his own ability to contact and integrate these different and unequal experiences of himself, of his wife Lili and of this complex human environment of loves, partings, abdications, death... resulting in unique reconfigurations of both himself and the context.

From self as the interface identity-alterity, we move on to self as both socio- and self-ability, so that: *"The two sides are together: ability leads to adventure and adventure to trouble. Man* ***has*** *to be malleable."* (PHG, p. 363) Thus most of the

safety-functions, that play an important role in mental disorders, are themselves healthy.

As an effect and a force in the field, self integrates a complexity involving *"factors that are not only biological, familial, and social, but are also derived from connections to technology, media, art, literature, institutions and so on... enhancing the aspects of what a body can do, the connections it enables, its possibilities of movements, capacities and affects, and its engagement and action (*Deleuze & Guatari, 1987 *in* Tavora, 2004, p. 233).

Considering the cohesion or integrity of the patient, his safety-functions and the protection of the patient in psychotherapy, Perls & al. say that: *"The patient is protected not by easing the difficulty, but because the difficulty comes to be felt just in the areas where the ability and creative élan are also being felt."* (p. 294)

Self, considered as an ability for contact and engaged in events that also require socio-ability, is not an idle self. It has plenty of work to do:

> *"But where does this new powerful self come from? Does it emerge waking as from a hypnotic trance? Or has it not been there all along, coming to the session, talking or falling silent, doing the exercise or lying rigid? Since de facto it exerts as much power as this in the proceedings, is it not plausible de jure to concentrate some attention on its proper actions of contact, awareness, manipulation, suffering, choice, etc., as well as on the body, the character, the history, the behavior? The latter are indispensable means for the therapist to find contexts of closer contact, but it is only the self that can concentrate on the structure of contact."* (p. 77)

This comes to reinforce the importance of the structure of the session, of how to employ and deploy the conflict, the anxiety, the past, the conception and the interpretation, of how to stimulate and develop awareness in order to reach the climax of creative adjustment through specific and progressive discrimination of self in the boundaries of the field.

The Gestalt suggestion as a possible structure for the interview with the patient is to propose and excite a safe emergency by concentrating on the actual situation. The goal would be that in the safe situation of emergency with the therapist, the initial intention may be experienced, become dominant and transform the figure. The patient would then go from the neurotic state as response to a non-existent chronic low grade emergency to concentrate on an

existing high grade emergency with which he can actually cope and for that reason can rearrange the experience and thereby grow.

This emergency could be a simple thing just as being able to look in someone's eyes. For a man in his middle fifties, coming to sessions for some years now, it took him a long time to be able to do that – to look into my eyes.

At first he would sit down in front of me - and turn his head to one side while speaking (to me). He could spend an entire session like that; and while listening to his monologue that had a kind of hypnotic effect, I felt like I was in a place where people talked and acted - but could not see.

It was not before a huge crisis, started by lies that were uncovered, took over his life and made this man despair, that I first dared ask:

"Who can you trust?"
"What?... There's nobody there for me."
"How can you know if you do not look and see for yourself?"

This proposal of self-ability is different from the assumption that all human energy comes from inside. It sets forth the notion that, as a function of contact, self can only fulfill itself by dealing with conflicts on the contact boundary. As long as it is a living process, there is no definitive diagnosis. What we focus on is this ability for contact or for contacting in the present field. Also, we have to consider what the more-or-less able self encounters in the contacting process, namely other selves that may also be more-or-less "able". And this will make a difference. In the case of this patient, he had been raised in institutions with no family. He had been able to survive and study long enough to get a good job and even achieve some kind of group engagement. In the long run, privacy and intimacy were problems for him. Psychotherapy helped him move through this entirely new place –where traditional psychopathology would have given up - and he was able to find himself (in) good company.

The emphasis on self as both self- and social-ability reinforces its flexible and plastic quality:

"This may sound like a threatening idea: how can we not associate the self with our own historical recognizable image of ourselves, or with the image of the other self as the person we physically observe? To me it sounds more exciting than threatening since it only threatens the safety of the status quo. If it is fundamentally associated with the stability of a formed figure

> *or a closed gestalt, the self then becomes a fixed idea, a rigidity. It loses its main quality - that of being a rich theoretical tool which emphasizes process, and the temporal and relational characteristics of subjectivity as viewed by Gestalt therapy."* (Távora, 2004, p. 235).

Self considered as the interface socio-self-ability does not refer only to theory – moral – but also and even more to practice – ethics.

Still regarding psychopathology, some of us psychotherapists (and not only those who work within the Gestalt or phenomenological approach, but other approaches as well) have observed that contemporary individuals carry a certain "psychopathic" style that is accompanied by a "sociopathic" characteristic of contemporary society. Instead of the natural aggressiveness emphasized by Perls, Hefferline & Goodman, which aims at chewing in order to nutritiously assimilate parts of the environment, preserving and destroying within some level of equilibrium between needs and possibilities, which is both self- and hetero-sustainable, here in contemporary times the I, the other and the *socius* are rendered absolute. This routinely leads to the alternated and/or simultaneous annihilation of one or another of these terms.

In this scenario, we are aware of the fact that as effective as psychotherapy can be, and as willing as the patient can be to carry out the work, people can only invest in their own change. We have no power over the other. Psychotherapeutic practice that invests in the notion of self as described here understands that the interface between the ability of preserving oneself and growing, and the ability of preserving and helping the environment grow, in the sense of personal and shared needs, do not carry causal, but ethical correspondence.

The ethics thus implied are linked to a certain conception of health. To the extent that we are relational beings, composed by the combination of several forms and contact processes, and integrated to the field as a whole, the important criteria is what actions and attitudes can support the healthy development of the field in its entirety. Thus, when conflicts emerge or when mistakes are made in a field where such ethics are present, the system's inherent tendency will be to self-repair, when we consider the installation of the field paradigm where there is no presumption of an inner healthy state versus an exterior disease, but the co-creation of humans and the world.

Of course, we must be aware that we are talking about anything but paradise here. Not the controlled departments of science, but the ever-thinking openness of ethics. Psychotherapy as a practice of (one)self in the world.

Self as the Form-Content Interface

As traditional geometric forms do not serve the purpose of describing the self as an event in the field, I have tried before to set forth an outline of the self as a vector *"crossing the space-time axis and drawing a more sinuous, circular or spiral rather than straight trace... its movement having no final conclusion"* (Távora, 2004, p. 236; 2009, p. 151). My attempt to create an image or drawing of the self suggests the visualization of "regions" of subjectivity, which are not in any way permanently closed spaces or essential nuclei.

> *"These regions, when and if they can be diagrammed, could be expressed by dashed and winding lines, in such a way that the "inner" can contact the "outer", within certain limits, in general not in an immutable way. The dashed line can form larger or smaller regions, with greater or lesser openings between the inner and the outer, but with the characteristic that it can potentially envelop the entire world by alternating what is in with what is out."* (Távora, 2005, p. 134 & 2014, p. 79).

In terms of the type of "shape" of the self, it is a complex form, a field or situation phenomenon, which is not delimitated by outline, but by limits. Outlines apply to geometrical and spatial forms and function as explicit margins. They concentrate space inwards, organizing the form structurally into central and peripheral areas. Precisely for this reason, by looking at an outlined shape, we see it as "closed" and frequently identify a nucleus. On the other hand, shapes of the self, with no outline or "closing", can appear to have different densities, allowing for the interpenetration of the "inner" and "outer" space and also for a greater differentiation and interaction between higher levels (Távora, 2005, p. 107-111)

Although the term self, or even "selfing" (as proposed in Távora, 2005), is not immune to the paradigmatic preconceptions that underlie the psychological theory and culture as a field, it can still be developed theoretically based on its description as *"that which belongs transitorily and/or that which returns, in a reflexive and recursive manner to the subject"* therefore coinciding with the emergence of subjectivity itself and with the subject as he or she appears at the surface of contact (Távora, 2014, p. 85-86).

Robine (2006b) also comes close to this idea by making reference to the "substantive" states of mind as places for rest of consciousness, and "transitive" states of mind as places for flights of consciousness (p. 87). He also comes close to it when he mentions the margin and the "border", understood as "predecessors of the background" (p. 88). He emphasizes the self is a field event and suggests transitioning from "the field to the situation". Robine describes the structure of

a situation as having an internal coherence of form and content, an explanation that coincides with the one presented here:

> *"The 'good form', as proposed by Gestalt psychology, is therefore not the simple form, the geometric form, strong and stable, etc., but the meaningful form; that is, a form that establishes a transducing order within a metastable system, a system of reality that includes potentials."* (p. 184).

Robine (2004) summarizes the extensive comparison made by Wheeler between the individualistic and field paradigms, emphasizing in the latter - a notion of self as the integration of internal and external experience, the other as an equal pole in the experience of oneself, the idea of boundaries as something that unites me and the other, as the place par excellence for the processes of the self, and therapy as the place for the shared experience and articulation of these processes.

In this chapter I place myself alongside both authors in these issues, all relevant to the discussion about the epistemological, theoretical, and methodological amplitude of the concept of self. I also emphasize continuity and discontinuity (or completeness and incompleteness), linearity and circularity, creative transformative action and subordination, and narrative fiction and reality. These aspects come together with others discussed in previous articles (spatiality and temporality, structure and process, depth and surface).

Throughout my attempts at updating these aspects of self in contemporary clinical practice, I have observed that they converge into that which could be considered a main contribution of our approach to the current state of the issue of the self – and to the work with this diagnostic, processual and instrumental concept in the daily routine of clinical practice. This great contribution lies in the framing of the self as the **form-content interface**, being that interface the place *sui generis* where self emerges into the world with a current experience that provides an updated version both of itself and of the world.

Well, is it not precisely the form of these processes that interests us, either as much or even more than its content? When we ask – *"How?"* at several different points in a therapy session, we are addressing the transitory and successive form of contact processes, of creative adjustment, of the trials, of successful or interrupted attempts at these processes. If self does not exist as an entity, and if *"the self is afraid of dying, as it is no more than transitory contact"* (2006, p. 104), what could interest us more than collaborating to the experiential and narrative construction of its transitory forms and of the content revealed in this interface?

Here, there is no previous content to be researched or discovered. As stated by Robine (2004) when he emphasizes that the flexibility of the self, which is more often approached as a process, is searched for much more than any "true self" that could be grasped and thus contained. Thus he explains being not interested in symbolic, causal analyses, in explaining the reasons that have led to that specific form; because what interests above all is the intrinsic value of the work, the plasticity of the form.

The notion of an interface is expressed here in harmony with the contemporary view of connected processes within the complexity of systems that compose human beings. Having the chance to talk to friends in areas of research that are so very different from my own, I join the challenge of proposing dialog and exchanging information.

In microbiology, for example, at the bacterial level, form and content usually blend together. Any stimulus that can be perceived by a microorganism through chemical signals follows the same paths, regardless of whether it is information on form or on content, to the target that must respond to this stimulus. Bacteria may change from individual (organisms) to group behavior (multicellular populations) in situations of high density, in a process called "quorum sensing". They may even join programmed cell death for the benefit of other members of a population. (Friedman, 2013)

Also, the most recent research in neuroscience stresses that the connections between the neurons and the environment around them are even more important than their physiology. Some studies point out that neurons that are physically close to each other may not make connections at all. Other studies on autism show that from the perspective of brain behavior, the most obvious deficit occurs at the level of functional integration. The inconsistency in these domains affects the emotional center and social-related behavior. The so-called "neurofeedback" technique intends to make these aspects functional again. It considers that there are limitations in terms of structural connectivity, but brings with it the "good news" that emotional connectivity in the autistic child is largely supported by functional domains. Furthermore, in post-traumatic disorders, in which there is no physical damage, all there is to work with is this altered state of functional connectivity. (Hugdahl, Beyer, Brix & Ersland, 2012)

Of course our work is not the same, since we do not mean to "correct" any deficit, nor choose any "correct" skill. On the contrary, we may develop the concept of self in order to dialogue with this and other contemporary languages on a consistent basis. Furthermore, when I propose to consider self as the

interface form-content, it is an attempt to overcome the problems raised by the use of the term "system" itself, which must be employed with caution, as it does not have an exact correspondence within Gestalt therapy theory.

We can even imagine self as a type of nonlinear system, just for the sake of comparison with linear systems. In a nonlinear system, "*the results of the agent's activity condition the activity itself*" (Oliveira *in* Novaes, 2008, p. 74). It is "*a type of system whose structure can be modified by the structure itself*" (p. 74), it is not an independent structure, associated with determined behavior that is carried out in a neutral and passive environment. It is "*a structural and functional dialog between the operator and his behavior, in such a way that the nature of the operator is not and can not be invariable*" (p. 74).

Also in a nonlinear system, there is something in the whole that is not present in the parts, precisely because of this power of affection between the whole and its parts, the power of self-affection. In this type of system, the whole will always be more (or less) than the sum of its parts. Thus, the property that most interests us is that the effects of an action do not always commensurate with the causes (this is the case, for example, of the "butterfly effect"). Thus, we can use the notion of a "nonlinear system" to help us let go of the all too linear action of narrowly determining the course of events. In the nonlinear framework, managing the variations of a given cause can lead to a final effect that is radically different than what was intended, if we think in linear terms. In this plurality of possible directions that can occur in nonlinear systems, there is no way of gauging a specific and predictable route.

The most significant aspect of these processes regards the possibility of evolution by means of variation. In this process, by carrying out its behavior, the system observes as the consequences of its activities fold back on themselves, which reminds us of the average functioning of the self as specified by Perls, Hefferline & Goodman in the "middle-mode". Thus, we understand that the system will evolve in such a way as to modify itself – unpredictably. In the case of the poem *"Quadrilha"* quoted above, Mr. J. Pinto Fernandes has a gamut of possible futures.

In other words, instead of acting according to its "nature" based on a context that is completely exterior to it, in the process of self (or selfing), there is a (double) folding back onto itself, a (double) unfolding of its actions on themselves. Thus, we arrive at another notion derived from this theoretical pathway and these conceptual approximations (a notion already used by Robine and significantly present in the work of philosophers Deleuze & Guattari) - the notion of the "fold".

These folds would be connections. As explained by the physicist:

> *"to fold is to connect, to put in contact that which was separate. Here is an open sheet of paper; we fold the sheet, and regions that were previously distant are now in contact, they connect. There is now an explicit external surface that everyone can see, as well as an internal implicit surface, which is invisible... but that everyone can intuit."* (Oliveira in Novaes, 2007, p. 78)

Much like what occurs in the psychotherapeutic process, the issue of change is complexified from this author's perspective.

> *"Complexifying is a way of innovating; we mutate because we re-fold, reinvent ourselves."* (p. 78).

And this occurs to the point of reaching the humanity itself or the subject itself:

> *"We can say that this double folding implies an introjection of this chaotization, the internalization of this unpredictability in what up to now we presumed to be human (...) By recognizing this aimlessness that make limits less rigid and that puts our own nature in variation, we are obliged to abandon the rigidity of the foundations and place all bets, bet on life, on a new foundation, a new openness, in something that is still to come."* (p. 86-87)

Conclusion: "Self in Extension" in Contemporary Clinical Practice

"Our life is not so much threatened
as our perception."
(Ralph Waldo Emerson)

If at the time of the emergence of Gestalt therapy, counterculture clamored for a return to the senses and for opposition to the status quo, what can be said of the contemporary situation?

The idea of crisis understood as multiple conceptions that compete among themselves and that give society dialogic vigor, exercising the sensitive and the intelligible and pointing to a new element that was veiled by the contradictions that lay within the process does not seem to correspond to the style, lifestyle and understanding (or lack thereof) inherent to contemporariness.

In this process of no return of technological acceleration we are sometimes led to feel like "primitives" in our own culture. The speed of transformation is such that it is almost impossible to concentrate on something that remains the same. We live "*too little, only the instant itself*" (Paul Valéry). Thus, nothing is in more danger than perception itself.

The founding text of Gestalt therapy already described the need to pay attention to the problems created by the possible "new powers" that emerge from humanity's development:

> *"In reviewing the steps of evolution leading to modern man and civilization, therefore, we lay the stress contrary to where it is usually laid: not on the increased power and achievement gained by each step of human development, but on the dangers incurred and the vulnerable points exposed, that then have become pathological in the debacle. The new powers require more complicated integrations, and these have often broken down."* (p. 364)

It seems, therefore, that in this process we leave the terrain of crises behind and enter the domain of mutations — of sensitivity, customs and mentalities, values, and notions of space and time. Such mutations do not only contradict, but also announce the decline of forms. However, it so happens that in this case, we do not necessarily or automatically know how to invent new forms. This is what seems to be happening in contemporariness, in which intelligence is confused with the idea of a single and invariable order, administered by science and technique. In the contemporary world, the market and consumption make practically everything circulate like merchandise. For example, individuals simultaneously consume things and time in life. And because everything is equal, choice is indifferent, dissolving any sense of what is preferable or desirable. It seems like nothing is effectively prohibited, but at the same time, nothing is entirely possible. There is lack of discernment in the order of importance of things before a new world of automatic reproduction. According to Baudrillard, this is the surrender of man before its "technical double". The era of techno-scientific "facts" has abolished the order of "fictions" of thought, theories and maybe even psychology.

The figure of mutation, in fact, implies deviation, decline, or drift, which suggests a change in the nature of the process. However, inherent to the concept of mutation is the occurrence of indetermination, associated with the intrinsic causality of the movement of deviation. Therefore, discourses and practices that can provide support for new images of that which is possible, of man, of self as a "practice of oneself in the world", become important and significant.

As already mentioned, this practice is ethical, not moral, in the sense that it offers an alternative to the hypothesis that social order lies in the lack of powerful capacities of people, in lack of imagination and faith; in other words, in the difficulty of carrying out successful adjustments that can result in the feeling of being someone – of having a self which is active in its own development.

Thus, this is another challenge facing us, psychotherapists that propose to work with the notion of self. In addition to all the problems of linguistic origin and technological and methodological appropriation of the term, we must also deal with its mutating "nature" and with the unpredictability of its destinies. In contemporariness, with the technical intensification of our intelligence and its extension via languages and different devices, we can speak of a "self in extension" (see Távora, 2015, in press). New elements and functions, new contents and forms of self, are catalyzed, in such a way that we are increasingly more defined not only by our intelligent material and organic nature (*homo sapiens*), but by the culture of computerized and mobile mediatization. "Digital natives", or in other words, our children and adolescents, are very different from us even in terms of capabilities and also limits. This has reached the point that, in addition to the growth of their physical bodies, the development of *sapiens children* (expression used by Oliveira, 2008) requires that they appropriate themselves of this cultural context and learn to manage these cognitive resources satisfactorily.

By the time this chapter is published I may be a 50-year-old mother of a 5-year-old daughter. Pregnancy and maternity brought to me an experience of being out of "myself" most of the time. My own limits extended to distances as far as her little fast feet can run. I was asked to change quite completely – again. All the merit belongs to her, this little bright-eyed girl who is so fond of adventure and surprise. My patients have been benefited, I think, by being even more appreciated now in their differences and singularity – I am even more curious about these now.

As psychotherapists oriented by a field perspective, in each encounter with a patient, a couple, or a family, we collectively and creatively participate in the emergence of something that is partly what we know and what we are; and

partly something that surpasses us, surpasses what we know and what there is. Restless relationship with the world. Self is self-surpassing. We can only hope this surpassing is the most successful in both creativity and integration.

Why?
"Because"
(The Beatles)

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3.

Dan BLOOM

The Relational Funcion of Self:
Self functioning in the most human plane

"To grasp something that has hold of us."
(Emil Staiger 1908 –1987)[1]

Introduction

The theory of self is central to how I organize my teaching of gestalt therapy. Indeed, the theoretical part of gestalt therapy's foundational text, *Gestalt Therapy, Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* (Perls, F., Hefferline, R., and Goodman, p. 1951, hereinafter referred to as PHG) is titled "Theory of Self," so it is evident that the authors had that intent. "We consider the self as the *function of contacting* the actual transient present" (emphasis added, PHG, p. 371) and for the next 95 pages they develop that simple sentence into a phenomenology, an epistemology -- and a psychotherapy. Different teachers of gestalt therapy draw different themes from our basic theory. For many years, I have presented the foundational model as strictly presented in PHG, much in the way I was taught by Isadore From and Richard Kitzler at the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy. More recently, I have been taking what I consider to be essential elements of the foundational theory as inspirations for me to explore new areas that I hope uncover fresh insights into gestalt therapy - yet within the original framework of the sequence of contacting and theory of self, function and structure.

1. Quoted in Gadamer, G, p.74, 1977/2007)

In this chapter, I will consider the theory of self from the point of view of its structures and functions in radically different ways. Rather than adhere to the original terminology of "self structure and function", I will refer to "self function" to emphasize its *function* as the structuring of contacting. That is, I will underscore PHG's initial statement that self is "the function of contact" (p. 371). Then I will suggest that the original partial structures and functions of self can be expanded beyond those identified by PHG -- the id, ego and personality function (p. 377).

A background assumption of this paper is that self is always in some way relational since in all ways it is of the social field of the situation, e.g. Yontef, 2009. Different gestalt therapists express this in different ways and with different emphases. Some gestalt therapists express this from the point of view Gestalt psychology (e.g. Wheeler, 1991) Gestalt theory, (Wollants, 2007) and American social pragmatism (Kitzler, 2007). A prevailing approach to relationality that has a dominant ethical theme is from the perspective of Buber's philosophy of dialogue (e.g. Hycner & Jacobs, 1995). The role of the individual and the meaning of contacting in gestalt therapy's relational theory is by no means settled (Bloom, 2011, Fairfield, M and O'Shea, L, 2008, Philippson, 2009, Robine, 2015, Wheeler, 2000). In this paper, however, I will only take on a meta-question - On what basis *are* we relational?

I will propose the relational function as the self function that structures our "being-in-the-world-with-others" and is the implicit relationality of human beings. The relational function structures our *being* together in a common world, which, as I will propose, is the environment as lifeworld. As such, the relational function is a "template" for our being-in-the-world-with-others. "To be", then, implicitly is "to be with" The relational function structures our contactful "finding" of another and being "found" by another as a co-emergent relational figure at the contact-boundary. With relational contacting, we can find ourselves dwelling with one another in world of familiarity and warmth, of comfort and trust – a homeworld.

When we view our work through this additional lens of the relational function, we may see disturbances in this self function's effect on the structure of contacting more sharply. I explain this more fully and offer clinical examples below.

Here I emphasize the phenomenological aspects of gestalt therapy. My approach is not phenomenology, not philosophy. It is my understanding of gestalt therapy within a phenomenological frame.

Organism/environment: The contact-boundary and lifeworld

In *Subjectivity and Selfhood,* the contemporary Danish phenomenologist, Dan Zahavi, writes "If we wish to understand what it means to be a self, we will have to examine the structure of experience and self-awareness, and vice versa" (Zahavi, 2005, p. 3). In 1951, PHG's chapter the "Structure of Growth" begins,

> Experience occurs at the boundary [of'][2] the organism and its environment... Experience is the function of this boundary, (p. 217, emphasis added).

That is how the theory section of PHG begins and how contacting[3] will be introduced in terms of the contact-boundary itself, the locus of the self's emergence. A few lines later, we learn that the contact-boundary is "essentially the organ of a particular relation of the organism and the environment."

And then,

> Let us understand contacting, awareness and motor response in the broadest sense, to include... every kind of living relation that occurs at the boundary in the interaction of the organism and environment. (p. 219)

And later, self is "the function of contacting the actual transient present (p. 371)...self is the figure/background process in contact-situations" (p. 374), and, therefore self is emergent of the boundary of the organism/environment. Zahavi might be pleased to know we have been examining "self" from within the structure of experience since at least 1951.

The environment

Let me address, extend our understanding of "environment" in a phenomenological direction in order to provide a ground for a different perspective on self functions.

The possible limitations of understanding environment strictly from the

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2. The original text uses "between" It is inconsistent with the basic notion that the boundary is not a place of separation but a locus of emergence. I always "correct" the text. This is not the only inconsistency with a number of important terms in this text.

3. PHG and many gestalt therapists use the terms "contact" and "contacting" inconsistently. PHG actually seems to use these words at random. I will use "contact" for the act of "contact" and "contacting" for the process.

perspective of the natural sciences were hinted at by some of leading proponents of the organism and environment model, e.g. Kurt Goldstein and John Dewey - both of whom were important influences on gestalt therapy (Aylward, 2006, Kitzler, 2007).

In *The Organism,* Goldstein commented,

> *...all creative activity originates from the organism to cope productively with the environment... But consciousness is prerequisite. Only if we keep this in mind are we prepared to deal adequately with the phenomenon of speech, ethical conduct, art, culture, and freedom to act.... (p. 261.).*

Here is John Dewey, in *Experience and Nature,*

> It goes without saying that man begins as a part of physical and animal nature.
>
> He is in the "state of nature" As an animal alone... he manages to *subordinate some physical things to his needs, converting them into material, sustaining life and growth.*
>
> When appetite is perceived in its meanings, and the consequences that it induces, and these consequences are experimented with in reflected imagination, *we live on the human plane, responding to things in their meaning (Emphasis added, p. 370).*

An organism/environment model that is strictly understood naturalistically, is stretched thin when applied to our world of thinking, reflection, meaning-making, understanding, imagination, and so on, unless we can understand "environment" more broadly, since we humans, as Dewey reminds us, also live on "the human plane." I suggest Dewey's human plane is the phenomenological plane and, as such, another dimension of the environment, as I will explain below.

Environment as Lifeworld

Edmund Husserl (1859 -1938) and Martin Heidegger (1889 - 1976) were the impost important phenomenologists of the twentieth century. Each developed their conception of the "human plane" Heidegger referred to the locus of human being/existence as the "world" defined by him in detail (e.g. Heidegger, 1927/1963). Husserl (e.g. Husserl, 1954/1970) on his own similar

terms, referred this "human plane" as "lifeworld" Their ideas developed in parallel. I choose to mostly use Husserl's lifeworld for this discussion because it more readily applies to the aspects of self functioning I am underscoring here.

To Husserl, the lifeworld is our common everyday world - the personal world of day to day conversations and interactions, the natural world, the intuited world, and the aesthetic - that is, sensed, felt - world (Steinbock, p. 87). It is the world in which we are living together and that was here for us in advance (Steinbok, p. 109). It is a world we were born into as a common world of society, culture, and history. In Heidegger's terms, this is the world into which each of us is "thrown" (Heidegger, 1927/1963).

This lifeworld is not only the natural environment, but also the always already humanly populated world where self is co-emergent and where self process (as contacting) sustains us. The lifeworld is the "worlded" background of self process. It is crucially significant that the lifeworld was always already there for us. It is a point I will repeat from time to time.

In his unfinished work that was not even published in German until 1954 and was translated into English only in 1970, *The Crisis of European Sciences,* Husserl wrote,

> ...for those of us who live wakefully in it, the lifeworld is always already there, being for us in advance, 'ground' for everyone. The world is pre-given to us, the waking, to us who are always in some way practically interested subjects, not occasionally, but always and necessarily; it is pre-given as the universal field of all actual and possible pre-given as horizon. (Husserl, 1954/1970, cited in Steinbok, p. 103, emphasis in by Steinbok).

"Pre-given" needs explanation since it will be important in my description of self functions from this perspective:

> To say the world is 'pre-given' is to say that it is experienced as having already been there, in these and those ways, *before I take what is given to me to do.* That is, the world is not just the given or what is, but rather what is pre-supposed[4] as being in these and those distinct ways in every experience that I, as engaged in this world, have (emphasis added, Crowell, p. 30).

The pre-givenness of the lifeworld is that upon which actual and possible experience relies (Steinbok, p. 110).

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4. This "presupposition" is bracketed in Husserl's famous transcendental reduction and in some versions of the phenomenological method in gestalt therapy. (e.g. Yontef, 1976)

In gestalt therapy terms, I am using lifeworld, then, to mean that aspect of the contact-boundary where experience is co-created and actually, as *pre-given*, shapes the *given* figures of contacting[5]. As pre-given, the lifeworld becomes the givens of id and personality functioning, which bear its traces and are structured by it. And consequently, ego functioning is itself of the lifeworld, its functions structured by all the self functions, since self as contacting is emergent of the boundary of organism/environment-lifeworld. This lifeworld is the basis for self's implicit relationality as the relational function of the self. I will expand on this.

Max: Far Away From Home

Each morning Max, a 40-year-old man, awakes in cold sweats and with an upset stomach. Max is from Germany, but speaks perfect, nearly accent free, English. He's been in New York City for 15 years. He owns a successful small business, but feels increasingly disengaged by his work. He has friends here in New York. But he hass been feeling more and more detached from them. He is 'happily' married. His husband is also from Europe, but does not speak German.

One day Max says to me, "On my way here, I watched all those people going to work. They knew who they were and where they were going and even why they were going there. They had lives. Purpose. And all I felt was anxiety. No, I also felt empty. Hollow and then anxious." He had a slight tight smile on his face. It was a usual expression. We were making good eye contact. We almost always do.

(I began to feel a sinking in my chest as he spoke. I had the image of a haunted person, wandering and confused. His tone was evocative of this experience in me. Did he hear it in his own voice? He hadn't mentioned he was lonely, but I felt the shadow of loneliness. No, loneliness… Not lonely. But alone. I felt connected to him, didn't I? Did he?)

"What is it like for him to be saying this to me? How do I seem to you?" (Was I rushing my questions? Did I want to connect to him too much right now? Was I feeling all alone now?)

"Okay. But… Maybe I am still empty… Maybe you understand me."

(His last sentence, "maybe" I understood him let no other possibility occur to me.)

"Would you say that again to me, but in German?"

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5. Since contacting is a co-emergent, co-creative phenomenon, the lifeworld is changes through the creative-adjusting of contacting. No given is static; nothing pre-given remains the same over time.

"But that is silly… You don't know German…

"What would it be like for you to speak to me in German, though? I am interested."

"*Ich fühle mich in Ordnung, aber vielleicht noch leer. Vielleicht haben Sie mir verstehen…..* Huh! I don't feel so hollow anymore."

And his voice was livelier and more resonant as he spoke German. I noticed I was "*Sie" rather than "du"*

This vignette illustrates the pre-given lifeworld of German culture that is always already there, yet somehow not available to him as ground and support for contacting. When he spoke German, though, he brought forward the sounds, resonances, meanings and connotations of the pre-given ground from which he was disconnected. The pre-given was of the deep (and unaware) background, until I asked him to pay attention to its available *givenness* in speaking the language of his original home.

As id functioning, the sound of German resonated in his body, was felt in his mouth, and presented to his ears. It was now given as the id of the situation. His speaking was the activity of ego functioning shaped by the know-how of personality function, which carried the traces of his culture and his own specific social history as the "aftermath of social contact" (PHG). His affect changed, his mood shifted as he increasingly identified with the culture, and home he was remembering in an embodied way. It was not merely a home as a place that was called out to him in his speaking German, but a home where people spoke to him and to whom he spoke. The sounds of his original language conjured up a relational world. It as a lifeworld of specific familiarity, a "homeworld" I will return to this, below.

The relational function affects the structure and qualities of his contacting the everyday lifeworld were he lives and works - including his session with me. In the experiment where he spoke German, the shape of relational contacting of Max and me changed. I became his impersonal "you" as the relational function of self "reconnected" Max to the others of his original lifeworld, the familiar homeworld of friends, family - the "Dus." I was a "Sie" of the lifeworld. I felt the resonance of his German and experienced myself reach with my limited German to understand what he said to me.

In following sessions, Max and I explored how he cut himself off from his ground as he quickly Americanized himself and repeats this in the way he contacts others.

Self functions – of the lifeworld

With the environment as lifeworld as a framework, I turn to self functions. PHG offers three structure/functions of self – id, ego, and personality function. As I said, I offer the relational function as a fourth.[6]

Although I will discuss them one at a time, no function is independent. Each function is structured with the whole, as, the colors red, yellow, and blue mix to form the colors of the spectrum, or individual notes, a chord and then a melody.

In practice, we customarily pay attention to the emerging figure as it stands out against the background and, as a consequence, we are able to support more freely emergent figure/grounds of contacting. (e.g. Francesetti, G. and Gecele, 2009 Spagnuolo-Lobb, 2013a, Spagnuolo-Lobb, 2013b,) This approach 'balances' alternating figures and grounds so that the self functions are seen in an integrated way as the structuring of contacting. This is true for most contemporary approaches to gestalt therapy, whether or not specific attention is paid to self functions. For this discussion, I will look at this process differently, not to suggest a different way of working, but to present an expanded view of self functioning.

Figure/ground: ego function, id, and personality function

In the original PHG model of gestalt psychotherapy, a lot of attention is given to ego function. "Neurosis" is the loss of ego functions (p. 432) as the consequence of so-called "interruptions of contact." The last two chapters of the section of PHG, which present our model of psychotherapy, are titled "Loss of Ego Functions" (pp. 429-466).

While neurosis is also described as a "disturbance of self function" (p. 432), the "losses of ego function" are figural. "Disturbance of self function" are significant insofar as they are directly implicated in "losses" (not disturbances) of ego functioning (p. 432). That is, when id and personality function disturbances are noticed, they are noticed in terms of their effects on such ego functions as acting, judging, orientating, differentiating and so on.

In the following section, I will upset the customary focus by bringing what is usually background to foreground, and make id and personality functions

6. These sections of PHG grant me license to add this fourth: "The subject matter of a formal psychology would be the exhaustive classification, description, and analysis of the possible structures of the self. (This is the subject-matter [sic] of Phenomenology.) Id, ego, and personality functioning are, for various reasons taken for the whole structure of the self. They are the "major stages of creative-adjustment" (p. 278).

figural, if only temporarily. In doing this, I hope to shed a different light on our work.

This expanded understanding of id and personality functions grounds gestalt therapy in the *environment as lifeworld*. As such, gestalt therapy is psychotherapy of the "most human plane" the plane of human meaning and human beings with one another. It is the plane of the relational function of self.

The first sparks of self: Id and personality functioning – the emergent flames of self

> Contact is the phenomenon that preceded any organization of experience; pre-Oedipal, pre-object, pre-conscious, pre-representation, pre-psycho… The pre is both genesis and structure. (Robine, 2015, p. 59)

At the pre-organizational foundation of contacting (Robine, 2015), id and personality functioning each are of the pre-personal, pre-reflective and pre-known lifeworld. Id functioning sparks contacting and personality functioning feeds and co-shapes the flame. This process is not one of an isolated atomized self process, but of one co-emergent and co-creative of the contact-boundary.

Co-emergent of the contact-boundary, each self function is marked or shaped by the pre-givens of that world itself out of which self is emergent. In the terms used by both Heidegger and Husserl, the others who are always already there influence or shape each self function. The warp and woof of emergent contacting, the frame upon which it is woven, is pre-given. The pre-given become aware and then become given as they are "taken up" as the sequence of contacting.

Self is the functioning of our being-in-the-world or, remaining consistent with Husserl's terminology, our being-in-the-lifeworld. Gestalt therapy self functions are the color of the landscape, are the taste of food, are sensation and pleasure, our knowing the difference between touching from caressing. They are the trove of culture and knowledge without which ego would not function, would have no compass, no orientation, and no sense of past, present and future. The world grabs us and we grab the world in the mutual clasp at the contact-boundary - self functioning.

Id functioning

We have a sense of the situation with id functioning,

> the given background including organizing excitations and past

> unfinished situation, as... the inchoate needs connecting the organism/environment, undifferentiated, unfocused, diffuse uncategorized, which is a direct sense of self's co-emergence of the contact-boundary (Emphasis added, PHG, p. 378).

Let me take this further. Id functioning is the first touching of and being touched by the material and phenomenal world, the environment. The pre-given, always already there complexities of the lifeworld are taken up as the given id of the situation. Id function is a pre-personal, per-subjective given – an Id of the situation (Robine, 2011).It is the "*Da*" in Dasein, that is, the "there" of Heidegger's being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1927/1963).

As a "there," and still within Heidegger's frame, id function is our "moodedness" or "attunement" (*Stimmung)* with the world. (Heidegger, 1927/1962) It our experience of "atmosphere" as surfaceless, unshaped, pre-dimensional space (Griffero, p. 17) It is sense of the situation when we enter a room of mourners, or our resonance with a person before we know anyone is there – or a therapist's experience of "absence at the contact-boundary" in certain clinical situations (Francesetti, 2012).

Personality function

> In the personalist attitude [of Husserl*] I experience myself...* as situated in a world in which there are others more or less like me, a world I did not create but upon which I can act and can engage communicatively with others, as an historical world in which things are more or less familiar. The personal pre-given world is a world of meaning (Emphasis added, Crowell, p. 35).

This personalist attitude is structured by the personality function of self. All that had been before us, all that is sedimented as the historical, cultural, social, inter-subjective, familial world into which we are born is the pre-given ground of our personal existence. This, then, is taken as given and "personalized" or "individualized" by us in the sequence of contacting. To this important extent, we *are* co-creators of the given lifeworld. Personality functioning is the given on which ego functioning can reflect. When "I experience myself" the object of "my" experience is personality function.

PHG speculates, "the metaphysical experience of time is primarily a reading-off of the functioning of self" (p. 375). Looked at more closely, it is personality functioning that contextualizes and temporalizes the "here and now" of

contacting. One moment ticks on to the next only because with reflection I can distinguish, one moment from the next. Past, present, and future have meaning within the structure of personality functioning.

But from the point of view of a lifeworld that is always already there, the unaware yet substantial "who I have been" is part of the pre-given architecture of the lifeworld's support for contacting.

Personality functioning, then, is the personal aspect of self, linked to personal continuous identity and history. It is who I am, here, at this time, in this social and historical context, in this culture and family. Likewise, it is who we are, in this community and so on. These are the given aspects of self, standing on the pre-given earth of the lifeworld, our culture, society, history, language and so on. Personality structures contacting so that we can make-meanings, be responsible, foresee the consequences of our actions, and can dream.

And this takes us to....

The organism does not choose its environment[7]. Self does not choose its lifeworld.

Self is as much "thrown" into the world from which it is emergent as it is a free "artist of life" (PHG, p. 235). What PHG refers to "our starting situation" has already started. Contacting and self do not emerge as if immaculate. Just as all contacting is adjusting to the affordances and constraints of any given situation, from the very beginning, the situation is significantly entailed by the pre-givens and then givens of the lifeworld. Self does not create itself, of course, but co-emerges at the boundary of the organism/environment with all the prejudices, presumptions, physical limitations, prowess and personal life experiences each of us brings to experience at the contact-boundary. It co-emerges of the environment as pre-given and then as given lifeworld. Self function as the structure of contacting is filled with infinite creative possibilities, yet bound hand and foot by the contingencies of the natural environment and the lifeworld.

Just as the contours of the earth I stand on subtly shape the soles of my feet, my grasp of the ground I push off of affects my gait and posture, the terrain of the lifeworld, the contact-boundary of the "organism and its environment" imprints itself on the self functions. It "imprints" them with the pre-given phenomenal terrain of the lifeworld, which includes "relationships" with the other who is always already there – the basis for the relational function of self.

7. A fish cannot choose land. A tiger cannot choose the sea.

The lifeworld and the relational function: the home of the anonymous others:

> The human motor system, well before birth is already instantiating functional properties enabling social interactions... The dawning of the interpersonal self thus appears to occur before birth. (Amantini and Gallese, pp. 21, 22)

Our movement toward water is emergent from thirst, for food from hunger, for knowledge from curiosity, avoidance of danger from fear, and so on. It is easy to see how each of these contacting processes is structured by the partial functions of self. Our movement toward another person is emergent from our need for another, which is structured by the relational function.

This function is emergent from the lifeworld in which the other is always already there. Importantly, the contact-boundary of the lifeworld is intrinsically populated – and populated by others who are always already related to one another.

We are born[8] *into* a world already buzzing with strangers. As organisms we take our first breaths in an atmosphere that was here before us. As human beings, we have no alternative but to accept this pre-given lifeworld crowded with people. Culture, language, history, and all other conceivable artifacts of the populated lifeworld are there, are here, already. We choose among possibilities pre-chosen for us by the happenstance of our birth, our place in the timeline of history, and so on.

Significantly, the lifeworld includes our *pre-reflective* relations to others, which is a kind of "proto- intersubjectivity[9]" This kind of human relating is prior to the possibility of our being intersubjective. Intersubjectivity is a relationship between *subjects*. Subjectivity itself is an achievement of human development, not a given of being, not present *ab initio*. In the language of self functions, to be a "subject" is to be able to reflect (ego functioning) and to have experience to reflect upon (personality functioning). Yet, proto-subjectivity is a basic organization of the relational function. It is the template for intersubjectivity pre-given and given of the lifeworld, and as such, affects all self functions. It is like a sketch the outlines of which we fill in as we live out our life. This "sketch" is an aspect of the relational function's structure.

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8. My focus here is on the structure of experience and the functions of self as they can be understood phenomenologically, not on theories of human development.

9. I am using "subject" and "intersubjective" in the phenomenological sense, as used by the sources cited. Intersubjectivity as such was one of Husserl's explicit concerns.

Contacting and Relational Intentionality

Contacting is always a contacting of *something*. It is a sequence with teleological end of final contact (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2010). With contacting comes satisfaction, some goal reached, some need met. Since contacting is "contacting of" contemporary gestalt therapy has usefully described contacting as having an intentionality since in phenomenology, consciousness is always a consciousness of something. (Sokowloski, 2000) To consider the intentionality of contact, then, is to consider its object[10], what it is directed at or for. When I want to eat an apple, the apple is the object of my intentionality for contact. When I want to sit on a chair, the chair is the object of my intentionality for contact. When I want to scratch my head, the itch on my head is likewise.

Contacting an apple, a chair or an itch is obviously not the same thing as contacting another human. While the former we may describe in terms of contact, the latter is different enough to deserve a special name, relational contact. Few people mistake an apple for a person. Unless there are special circumstances, we know when we are touching an apple and when we are touching a person, when we are in a room filled with furniture or a room with people.

The relational function orients us towards the human other. It functions as the structure of relational contacting with which we able to distinguish the non-human from the human other. This self function re-shapes our intentionality for *material* contact to intentionality for human contact, relational intentionality. Relational intentionality is potentially bi-directional. In contacting another human who is contacting me, our intentionalities as if join, become "bi-directional" or reversible" no longer follow along a single trajectory, but are in relation to each other. We come to know ourselves by being known by others.

The relational function structures relational contacting, which includes being open to, welcoming of, as well as approaching the other (Bloom, 2013. The relational function accounts as much for the *implicit* relationality of self as the id function accounts for the sense of the situation, the personality function one's sense of identity, and ego function self's agency.

As emergent of the lifeworld, the relational function as if straddles the tension between "proto- and actual intersubjectivity" This tension is the pull that draws us from an anonymous to a specific other, impels and directs relational intentionality. I will elaborate.

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10. Note: this is not a subject/object split. While in some models of intentionality, this may be the case, in understandings from Heidegger through Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, and Gadamer, the process of intentionality is of one whole, indivisible into customary subject/object categories. This is a post-Cartesian intentionality. With this understanding in mind, it is fair to then speak of an intentional object, since it and the "intender" are of one, whole, seamless world or lifeworld.

The population of the lifeworld: the anonymous other

We are thrown into a world in which others are already there. That is, we are already with others before we actually meet anyone in particular. We are beings-in-the-world-with-others *Ab initio*, we are "with others" but these are "indeterminate others" The everyday lifeworld is a social world of "me" and "any one" of anonymous intersubjectivity where I am in relationships with others prior to actually experiencing or contacting them as specific people.

To be-with-any-other is to be with another who is faceless, nameless, and without personal substantiality or specificity, (Heidegger, 1927/1962). To be with "any" one is also to be with no one. The presence of these "any" others, then, is also a presence of a deficiency since an anonymous other is, well, anonymous. We miss something important in this connection. Familiarity. Anonymity and intimacy do not usually go together. A world exclusively of "anyone" is a world without specific acquaintances or friends. To be in a world of "any ones" is also to be an "any one" to others. The relational function orients us to fulfillment of this blank "me" and "any one" with "me" and" this one" The "me and this one" is a different "me" from the "me and any one" Our move from an "any one" to a "this one" in relational contacting is structured by the relational function of self.

Our encounter with a specific other, though, "simply unfolds or articulates what was *already there from the very start, a priori,* rather than adding anything new[11]" (Emphasis added, Zahavi, 2001, p. 156). Relational contacting, then, articulates the implicitly relational structure of the lifeworld, the move from the anonymous "any" other who was always already there to the "this" other, "here" and concretely present in contacting. We are born or thrown into a lifeworld whose surfaces we push against in order to find ourselves - to know "that" "how" "what" and "where" we *are.* But to know "who" and "with whom" we are, we need not only to know and other, but be known by an other (Frank, R., 2015, personal communication). This is the role of the relational function of self.

As "any one" becomes "this one" the chilly anonymity of the lifeworld is personalized with the concrete, specific, known others - "me and this/these other(s)" This is the shift from the anonymous lifeworld to the familiar homeworld (Steinbok, 1995, pp. 179 ff.). We "dwell" with familiar others in our shared homeworld.

Of course, in our everyday lives, we live in both the anonymous lifeworld and our familiar homeworld. Undisturbed relational functions structure contacting so the clearest and most discerning choices of ego functioning are possible. I cannot only select whom I want to know but to what degree I want to know

11. This is not to say that the encounter with the specific other is not a new experience. Contacting is always novel. The experience itself discloses an underlying implicit structure – of "being-with"

them. We choose our friends and whom we love. We also have to live in the everyday lifeworld of "me" and "any one" These others are also the faceless *any* ones we pass in the street, for example. These are the indiscriminate others for whom the pronoun "anyone" can be applied. This is our usual way of casual interpersonal interaction. These others constitute the impersonal "we" "We New Yorkers love one another," for example. Our everyday activities are nevertheless intrinsically social and reflect our participation in a community of others, even in in the absence of concrete, specific others (Tailpale, 2014, p. 157).

But sometimes, as with the other self functions, there are disturbances of the relational function.

Consider the example of Max, whose relational function disturbance was reflected in his sense of living in a world of strangers. How was it that even in a world of friends he was feeling detached? When I invited him to shift from English back to German, he returned to the language of his original home, of his family and the people he grew up with, where he was known. His sense of hollowness faded. That was the language of his homeworld, where his relational contacting was hypothetically more profound and grounded than, arguably, the contacting he was now customarily making in New York City, a world where he experienced himself empty and among strangers. And consider also that he addressed me as "Sie" instead of the familiar "du," even though we had been on a first name basis for many months. It was as if relationally we were of two worlds.

Example: Pardon me, have we met?

Jack and Jill came into my office and sat on my couch, down next to each other opposite me. When Jill made the appointment, she said they'd been married three years and needed help communicating.

The sat shoulder to shoulder with enough distance between them that I doubt either could sense the warmth of the other's body.

"What brings you here?" I asked in my customary way.

She looked in my direction and spoke, "We don't know how to talk to each other. We fight. He doesn't listen to me. I am getting nothing from this relationship."

She spoke quickly with hardly a breath separating her words. I felt sentences thrown at me, not spoken to me.

"Jack, how is this for you?"

"That's what I always hear. It's not as if I get anything, either." Rather than flow to me, his words seemed to drop lifeless at his feet. His face was blank. I noticed I was holding my breath as if I were waiting for him to finish the sentence he already finished… Who are these people?

On impulse, I handed each a note pad.

"I have an idea. How's this? If you want, would each you take a note pad and pen to write a description of your partner? Say whatever you like – but if you could say who this person really is to you, that would be great. Just about 5 minutes or so."

They shook their heads in agreement.

They wrote quickly. Neither looked at the other. They leaned slightly away from one another. Their breathing was shallow.

When done: "Would you exchange your descriptions and read them aloud."

"This isn't me at all!!!" "Who the hell IS THIS?" Energy? Excitement?

This first meeting with Jack and Jill is explicable in terms of traditional self functioning. They sat on my couch much as strangers would sit. What was it like for them to be as close as that – or as far as that? Could they sense that distance? And what would they sense? This might be how I might have attended to id functioning.

Jill looked to me as she spoke, but spoke quickly without breath or much separation between her words. Her sentences were thrown at me. And at the same time, she seemed uninterested. Were I drawn to explore ego and personality functioning, I might attend to her rhetorical style and the deliberateness of her speech.

Clearly the aesthetic qualities of their modalities of contacting (Bloom, 2014, Francesetti, 2007, Robine, 2015,) occlude each person's capacity to be clearly oriented toward the other, to be able to discriminate within the relationship, to speak and be spoken to, to hear and be heard. Id, ego and personality functionings were markedly obscured as each person's possible wishes for closeness to/or distance from the other, to know the other, or to sense and feel themselves and the other, were diminished. The qualities of contacting, its shape and form, are structured by the self functions. Relational contacting as structured by the relational function was figural.

When Jill spoke to me, she seemed to have to take extra effort to propel her sentences to me in order to close a distance between us, a distance I only felt increase as I sensed her effort. I experienced the same thing when Jack spoke to me.

Since my figural experience at the contact-boundary was of being spoken *at* rather than *to*, had no sense of an intentionality for relational contacting from either of them that would meet my own. My experience of the emerging figure was of my being present to a pair of people who were strangers to one another and had no interest in reaching me, of changing from just anyone sitting in front of them to a person who could help them.

Disturbances of relational functioning appeared in the qualities of

contacting. For example, the lifelessness of the tones of their speech signaled a diffuse or obscured intentionality for relational contacting. This reflected a disturbed relational functioning affecting the id and ego functioning as the entire structure of the sequence of contacting was organized around anonymous intersubjectivity.

Each person's intentionality for relational contacting seemed to bend off its expected mark. It is always fair to assume that a person replying to my question intends to be answering me. I had no sense that either of them was speaking to me.

The relational function of self orients one person toward an other and organizes the intentionality for relational contacting in which one-directional intentionality for contacting becomes bi-directional or reversible as it meets the relational intentionality of the other. A hallmark of relational contacting is its quality of being open and welcome. (Bloom, 2013) Clearly, my sense of this situation was of nearly chaotic relational intentionalities.

I knew their names, yet to me they were just outlines of people – much more so than in a usual first encounter. I heard their words, but it was only a disconnected impersonal meaning that got across to me. The tones and embodied meaning that, to some degree, I am accustomed to experience in first sessions was missing. I experienced a stillness that did not suggest anxiety. They seemed as present to one another as strangers in a waiting room. It was as if each were talking about some absent person. Jack didn't even acknowledge that Jill had spoken when he said, "that's what I always hear," focusing of the content of the said and not the person who was speaking.

That simple note pad experiment made it clear to them that each was an "anyone" to the other. They and I were energized. But did it matter to them? This was something to be found out.

Time and again in this work, as Jack and Jill came up against the experience of being strangers to one another, each felt a loss of something they either had or wished they had. Each time, the absence of the particular other and of being a particular other was the contactful center of the session. Each time, different, new feelings emerged, which had been obscured by the disrupted relational functioning. Over time, Jack found Jill. Their finding of one another was the functioning of the relational function of self.

All self functions are of the contact-boundary as emergent functions of self, creatively-adjusting to the possibilities and impossibilities of the organism/environment (lifeworld) field or situation. As such, Jack, Jill, Max, and I were co-implicated in contact-boundary phenomena that I described. That is, while clinical attention may be on this or that person, it is always more fundamentally on self functioning at the contact-boundary and not as an intra-psychic process.

The "shadows" of Buber and Levinas?

Perhaps the move from anonymous to specific intersubjectivity I presented here is shadowed by Martin Buber's "twofold principle" of distance and relation, of I-It and I-Thou, the between, and so on(Friedman, 1955, pp. 80 – 81, 83, 85). Are there not also hints of Emmanuel Levinas's "face of the Other," the ethical subject and responsibility (Levinas, 1981/1998)? These are questions worthy of exploration at another time, in another place. This much I can say. The relational function of self is also the dialogical function of self insofar as it not only structures dialogical contacting but *is* our implicit being-with others. It is our relationality. It would be surprising, then, if the relational function of self did not also suggest Buber, Levinas or any of the philosophers of dialogue. Any apparent similarities are also substantial, material differences. Unlike the theological/dialogical philosophies of Buber and Levinas, my presentation of gestalt therapy's self functioning is from the perspective of the entirely secular phenomenology of the lifeworld, which I believe is implied but not developed in our customary usage of the term "environment"

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to offer a new way of understanding self function. When I train gestalt therapists, I bring them to the edge of familiar theory and take them several steps beyond it. In doing so, I challenge myself and I challenge them. In this paper, I have done no less with you.

I began with self function and opened them up into a phenomenological mode. By broadening "environment" of the contact-boundary of the organism/environment field to include the lifeworld, I hoped to extend our theory and practice more fully into what John Dewey referred to as "the human plane" On this plane, I re-cast self functions as emergent of the lifeworld and suggested the on-going embeddedness of self as being-in-the-world-with others. From this basis, I proposed an additional self function that accounts for self's implicit relationality, that *is* relationality– the relational function. I further reflected on intersubjectivity in the context of the relational function – and the move from anonymous to specific intersubjectivity as in relational contacting.

In the final analysis, no words or concepts capture human experiencing. Everything we can say is only an attempt and then we try again. By taking a radical approach to experience itself, to the contact-boundary, self process, the sequence of contacting, and approaching our work with respect for the emergent aesthetic qualities of contacting itself, gestalt therapy is an ongoing, developing and always new modality – so long as we continue to try and try again to push our understanding beyond what we have taken for granted.

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Self as a Population

1. Dynamics of the Self

After a century of extensive writings, the self has recently received a new level of acceptance temporary conceptual heir to the soul and the unconscious. The concept that I am proposing and that I will elaborate in this text has four key processes that deepen an understanding of the person, on both the surface level and the deeper levels normally attributed to both the soul and the unconscious:

1. Point/counterpoint relatedness
2. Configuration
3. Animation
4. Dialogue

Point/Counterpoint

The concept of self addresses the interplay among whatever aspects of the person come into focus, crossing the line between surface experience and depth. This interplay takes surface experience at face value, not as simply a substitute for what is obscured. In the language of the self, this means that there is no "real" self, hidden by surface experience, but rather a community of selves that

vie for ascendancy. For example, and intellectual man, feeling unhappily caught into studious way of life, gets fed up and says his "real" self is a surfer. Not so. In terms of the interplay among his options, he is talking about two of his selves--the intellectual self and the surfer self--each with its own character.

Therapists considering the population of selves that I propose can learn a lesson from music, where point/counterpoint interaction is a familiar compositional factor. In point/counterpoint, independent musical voices are set against one another. Some are complementary, others dissonant, but all contribute to the integrity and richness of the entire piece of music.

In contrapuntal music, neither the primary melody nor its counterpoint loses its individuality, yet both contribute to the character of the total work. So it is with the self and its many contrapuntal voices. The disparate voices are not there merely to be smoothed over and made harmonious but rather to invite the listeners--therapists and patients-- to encompass variety and appreciate the unity that arises from the complexity of the point and counterpoint patterns.

That some of a person's selves are obscured from attention does not mean that they are more real than the manifested self. It means that these selves need to be coordinated with each other. Though these obscured selves may seem very close in concept to the unconscious, they are not the same. Each self has an identity of its own, rather than a substitutive role in the person's makeup. For example, it has been easy for therapists guided by the concept of the unconscious to say that a person who indicates love for his mother "really" hates her in his unconscious mind. In contrast, what I am proposing is that the selves in the background are counterpoint voices, perhaps unheard, to the ascendant selves; the aim of wholeness is to hear these voices simultaneously.

The interplay between surface and depth goes on always as self formation goes easily in and out of awareness. This fluctuation between surface and depth makes the self a bridge between unconscious and conscious experience. Yet, as I shall show, the self is more enduring than the continual fluctuations of the ephemeral experience.

Configuration

Selves are formed by a configurational reflex, which takes the disparate details of personal experiences and forms then into a unified pattern. Such organizational reflexes result in shorthand identifications of clusters of experiences. Through these clusters of experiences, a person may be identified in innumerable forms: an iconoclast, a robber, a singer, a coward, or a noble person. At some point, as the significance of these characteristics evolves, these clusters may merit designation as selves.

The urge to rescue a shred of their souls, a fragment that will register their

existence, makes many of our patients feel compelled to spend their lives reaching for hints of their true proportions within what they fear is a shapeless existence. Because shapelessness is often seen as fractured identity, they may give their sense of self premature shape, falling for flawed summations and getting stuck with them. Often they have no idea what is wrong because they won't realize how they have summed themselves up or how misrepresentative the troublesome summations may be. The concept of the self not only helps recognize this trouble but also gives new guidance for reconstructing the person's summary conclusions.

Still, in contrast to the multiform nature of the self, the notion of a single image of who we are remains a strong attraction. For some people this search for an easy sense of identity is nothing more than the wistful despair of people grieving over an ancient fragment of themselves. Other people seriously try to harmonize their behavior with their most desired qualities.

In any person, his experiences combine into certain configurations. First the raw data of the person's life are registered, then they evolve into a recognition of personal characteristics, then formation to self. The therapeutic challenge is to get a fresh view of these incremental influences, which could coalesce into a new sense of self. But lowering the threshold for new and therapeutic self formations is difficult when the patient's mind is already made up about what counts.

Animation

The self is more than a simple accounting of experiences. It is composed by the human inclination to create fiction, forming characters out of characteristics. It is a named entity, representing clusters of experienced events. Thus a person who is highly tuned to giving gifts may be said to have a gift-giving self; a person who loves sailing, a sailor self. When the therapist personifies characteristics, giving then humanlike identity, she animates these characteristics.

This transformation from a characteristic to a self is selective. If, for example, I were to tell a person he was being gullible, this would simply be a reference to one of his characteristics, a familiar form of communication. However, when I want to emphasize the enduring nature of his gullibility and the experiences that cluster around his gullibility, I may take the designation to a new level by telling him that his gullible self was speaking.

In a sense, this person is composed of a population of selves that represent him, one of which is his gullible self. We dramatize his gullibility by translating this directly describable characteristic into the more tangibly accentuated language of internal characters.

Individuals also coalesce their personal reality. The human split between the observer and the observed, the doer and the done-to, makes two people

out of one person. It is an internal relationship, neither party ever alone. As a result of this internal interactive phenomenon, a person's raw experiences--be they the seeds of altruism, dependency, enterprise, endurance--may become recognized, united, and named as altruistic self, dependent self, enterprising self, enduring self. By the act of coloring experiences by transforming them into an identification, the person comes to care more than he would about simple descriptive designations. Through this process of special recognition and accentuation, the person anthropomorphically empathizes with his self, much as he might with a character in a novel.

This empathy with self is required indefinitely. The therapist must tap into this self empathy in order to smooth the way into new appreciations of the individual's personhood. Until this quality of empathy--not pity or despair or resignation--is restored, we face the same neutered reaction the reader of a novel may face when, no matter how good the writing may be, he does not care about the characters. It is this empathy with the self that mobilizes the person to continue and persevere in self acceptance, even in the face of disappointment and confusion.

The restoration of caring has often been recognized as a key factor in therapy. Caring for the self, empathy for the self, leads to more than an impersonal talking about one's self. It replaces token communication with an appreciation of self, even the love that serves as prime human motivation.

Dialogue

Selves vie with each other for a place in the life of the host person, creating internal friction. When that person comes to therapy he is, often unknowingly, trying to reduce that friction by updating the proportion of influence of the various selves. In the process some selves, long relegated to the background, are accentuated and others may diminish in influence.

To reestablish a mutuality of influence among selves, as I am calling them, Fritz Perls in his early writings and workshops featured personlike identities as a centerpiece of both his theory and his method (Perls, 1947; Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman, 1951). These identities, such as top dog and underdog, were animated, personlike inner characteristics, tantamount to selves. Perls gave sharp attention to neurotic splitting, not only between top dog and underdog but between any paired characteristics that are alienated from each other, such as indomitability and resignation. These splits were transformed from near conceptual orientations about the person and to working dialogues between the two members of the split pair.

By means of the dialogue among these internal characters, not yet called selves, gestalt therapy introduced a graphic depiction of a persons internal

struggles. Conflict could be seen as a dramatic interplay between internal beings inimical to each other. Therapy sought to name these mutually alienated beings and, through guided dialogue, to restore harmony among them. The aim was to merge the disharmonious aspects of the person so that though they could become join contributors to the persons wholeness. Live engagement through dialogue would evoke the empathy for the host person for his characters within.

By this means, the point/counterpoint interrelationship in the internal struggle for personal breadth was addressed. If diversity and dissonance add spice and depth to music, why not to the concept of self? One reason is that in music, the counterpoint voices are heard simultaneously and are very difficult to disregard. When a person hears two melodies at the same time, it would be prodigious act to exclude one or the other; both melodies enter the ear at once. Where selves are concerned, it is easier to uncouple them and select which one will be attended to. Taking the easy way out, where counterpoint is distracting, any particular self is more readily set aside. However, as is true of musical counterpoint, people may relish the dissonances among the variety of selves that any person must coordinate to live a full life.

When I address the point/counterpoint dimension, I find myself in what I call the *radical middle*--radical because it is fundamental to be at the center of all personal experience and because it represents free reactivity, moving in whatever direction my choices go. The radical middle is not a point of neutralization but rather the place where the therapist encompasses everything from what T.S. Eliot (1943) called the "still point of the turning world" where "the dance is" (p. 11). Eliot's image summons us to the uncanny core of a swirling eventfulness, magnet to all experience, a locus of concentration and inclusion.

Within such multiplicity, the natural reflex to synthesis is our ally. Where the person is overburdened with the requirements for synthesis, gestalt therapy has taken a simplified and active approach to the problem by directly identifying and energizing alienated aspects of a person. Perls (1947) said, "By remaining alert in the centre, we can acquire a creative ability of seeing both sides of an occurrence and completing an incomplete half. By avoiding a one-sided look we gain a much deeper insight into the structure and function of the organism" (p.15).

However I want to propose the point/counterpoint interrelationship as a new slant on synthesis, different from the fusion that Perls advocated and, I believe, more suited to the treatment of selves. Whereas the synthesis of selves is commonly thought by gestalt therapists to be the creation of a third quality, a fusion but by the retention of dissonant selves, each one continuing to play out its own original quality within the diversity of the person's voices.

As I recognize the voices of these selves, I may help my patient register them as part of her total self, each with its own character, and thereby create a synthesis within diversity. Not do psychological dissonances all have to be resolved into a fusion.

2. The Creation of Self

I now come to a key discrimination about the self, without which the concept of the self will always remain elusive to therapists and patients alike. This source of elusiveness is the failure to differentiate clearly enough between the concept of the self and the person. Often the reference to "self" is just another way of referring to the person himself, using the term as though it were a pronoun, standing in place of the person.

The word self is especially vulnerable to that confusion since people refer to themselves all the time. They will say, "I did that myself" or "I am proud of myself" when referring to their own actual acts and feelings, like painting the house or feeling exhilarated. Or they may ask, "What is true about me, the person I am? Am I intelligent? peculiar? reliable?" They are simply looking inward to their own characteristics; there is no implication of the self as new psychological entity.

Differentiating the Person and the Self

The person of a theory of the self must be to recognize a new entity serving to enhance understanding of the person, not just to serve as a linguistic convenience for referring to the person. In describing the self earlier, I conceptualized an entity within the person, much as we see it in the establishment of id, ego, and superego, metaphorical compositions of intrapsychic functions. But the differentiation of the self from the person is more difficult.

The self in its largest amplitude is so supraordinate a configuration, as for example in thinking of the "real me", that it is almost coextensive with the person. Yet in its smaller arcs--the rational self or the dominating self, for example--it is more clearly a constituent of the person rather than the person himself. It is necessary therefore to understand the fact that, pronoun function notwithstanding, the self is always a summation of large or small clusters of characteristics within the person, a metaphorical dynamism that guides the person's behavior and feelings. This is sometimes so fine a differentiation from the person himself that almost all theorists go in and out of using the self as a special composition created by the person, often using it when they are actually talking about the person.

The nature of self is elusive because it cannot be identified by simple registration of experience. It is identified, instead, by the functions of summation or representation of experience. This summation process in its many forms is as compelling as is the registration of simple experience. The summation process, within awareness or not, is the vehicle directing the person's search for the self.

The self has often been said to be illusory. The process of configuration--or

summation, which is one of the attributes of configuration--is no more illusory than any other psychological agency for making sense of the world.

These views of illusion as unreal perception should be differentiated from my view of the self. As the inherent artistry of the human mind operates, the self--a representational portrayal of aspects of the person-- is not an unreal perception. Far from being merely a perceptual shadow, the self elaborates experience so as to reveal what is otherwise unrealized by raw experience alone.

This creation that I am proposing as the self is an example of natural gestalt formation and greatly reduces the confusion between person and self. First, the self and psychological event intending to illuminate and animate reality, not to replace it. Second, this configured process is fluid and it is the creator of many selves. It is easier to distinguish between the self in the person when there are many selves because it is very clear about any person that there is only one of him.

Further heightening the distinction between person and self is that selves may exist outside awareness and receive only wispy recognition. So tempting is this vague realization that people commonly feel within reach of it when they say they want to "find themselves", they often treat this intuitive sense of the self's existence as though the self where an identifiable singleness which, once admitted, will enhance the reality of an otherwise indistinct existence.

Introjection: A Therapeutic Resource

One vital tool in the creation of these flawed versions of what the patient is like is the introjection process. Through the overloaded requirements the patient is faced with in imbibing the world of experience, he develops skewed visions of his self. However, introjection, a source for mistaken self formation, may also serve as an ally in the therapeutic process. As introjection opens the patient to a flawed organization of messages about himself, so also may it in therapy open to new messages and a reorganization of the old one.

Introjection is the reflexive ingestion of experience. Through it the individual is merged with society. The offerings of society are embedded into his psyche from the beginning, largely without choice. The phenomenon, ominous in its possibilities for poisoning the mind, it is also the most wonders. Language, customs, purposes, and information become transmitted, and each person becomes oriented to how he won't take his place in the generational transitions on which every society depends.

There is in each of us a clear and compelling interjected hunger for absorbing the world around us. That is how we gather the experiences that form the self. Nevertheless, though the achievements of introjection can be a fundamental source of societal unity and self creation, they have largely been

seen by psychotherapists as the personal handicap, a cross people must bear and payment for getting along.

Perls (1947), for example, considered introjections the basis for maintaining structures that the person needed to destroy and "in every case contrary to the requirements of personality" (p. 29). In the face of this dark view of introjection, Perls emphasizes the healthy antidote of chewing, actual and metaphorical. Actual chewing transforms the infant from someone who receives food in the form offered into a person who can and must change food's structure before taking it in. A baby can't swallow a cracker, but as he grows, he breaks it down to size by chewing it.

The metaphor of chewing--modifying--extends to other experiences: unwelcomed instruction, cold weather, troublesome opinion, personal rejection, and so on. Rather than ingesting these experiences as given, people alter them to make them fit their individual needs. The success of this process will be crucial in creating a harmonious sense of existence. As Perls (1947) says, "Any introjection must go through the mill of the molars if it is not to become...a foreign body--a disturbing isolated factor in our existence" (p. 132).

Many distorted self images are created through introjection. But pathological result of introjection are only half the story. To incorporate the other half of the story, the healthy component, I would like to redefine introjection as spontaneous receptivity, unimpeded by the deliberative faculties of the mind.

The first attribute to introjection is that it is a wondrous source of learning, hospitable to the abundance of the world's offerings, including what the therapy has to offer. Though introjection is receptivity, it can be appetitive rather than passive. The restoration of both appetite and receptivity is a major goal of therapy. If we look to ordinary events, we see the effects of introjective vibrancy all the way from the infant who spontaneously picks up his native language to the concertgoer blissfully soaking in the music. This same appetite and receptivity are available in psychotherapy, where the patient may be fascinated with the new messages.

The second attribute of introjection, crucial to the healthy learning process, is that it does not stand alone. By itself, introjection has no implications for psychological well-being--no more so than blood circulation does for blood pressure levels. The key to well-being is not whether we introject but how well the introjected experiences are integrated into the person.

The Introjection Triad

Integration is facilitated by three operations that together compose the process of introjection, an introjection triad of contact, configuration, and tailoring.

a. Contact

Though the gestalt principles of contact are extensive, perhaps it is enough to say here's the contact in the instrument of the connection between the individual and the world. Only through contact does the individual meet the world and find anything to introject. Even in infancy, where introjection is primary, the baby doesn't just drink the milk. He feels the touch of mother, tastes and smells the milk, and senses it's fluidity and texture. He hears mother's cooing and scolding voice. He sees a smile or a scowl. He is touched gently or harshly. Such contacts, multiplied in power and complexity, are the wrong material for introjection.

Although it is often mistakenly believed that a person in good contact does not introject, contact and introjection are actually interwoven. So close in touch is the contact in person, as a matter of fact, that he emerges momentarily with the other person while paradoxically maintaining his individual identity. This closeness to the contact person is, in a sense, a lubricant for the introjected process because it opens the person to receptively.

Take, for example, a person who comes to therapy because he had always felt isolated and continues to live his life according to introjected expectations of isolation. If, in good contact with his therapist or others, he begins to feel understood and valued, this new feeling will open him to relax his isolated self while safely introjecting a sense of belonging. That is, he doesn't just figure out he is understood and valued. He drinks it in, sometimes hardly realizing it does happen. This is not necessarily a function of the therapists dominating influence but just as easily a measure of mutual respect and trust that opens the person to self-benefiting beliefs.

b. Configuration

The second phase of the introjection process is configuration, a process designed to create internal unity. This ideal of unity is so compelling, yet so easily thwarted by the complexities of experience, that it can comprise a life's work. Given the early circumstances of great fluidity in registering these introjected experiences in weak organizational development, it is questionable whether self exists yet at all. The experiences that register are only loosely organized in the beginning but are subject to a more stable organization at a later time.

At first, the child seems to be a yes or no organism, accepting whatever comes in or rejecting it, with little sense of the relationship among experiences. These early experiences, weakly organized, will become the ingredients of a leader self formation. The individual seeks to fit new experiences into his total picture of himself, thus giving relevance and coherence to as much experience as possible. The success of this configuration reflex and fitting things together is a crucial determinant of the future of the introjection particularly as to whether it turns out to be "healthy" or not.

In the earliest days of a person's life the configurational process is relatively simple. The child with only scant experience has very little to which he must connect any new experience. Furthermore, in determining what fits is minimal. Certain early difficulties, such as awful milk and brutal treatment, would be manifestly alien to the already formed biological needs. Also, patterns and eating cycles would be difficult to organize if the parental pressures didn't fit the individual needs of the child. But even with a number of such expectations, most of what comes in, comes in on the ground floor of the organism, and the child has great freedom to introject because it is easy to fit his experiences into a relatively meager context.

The work of configuration must be differentiated from assimilation. Assimilation refers to the process "through which the 'unlike' is made 'like.'... Learning, when it is digested and not swallowed whole, is said to be assimilated" (Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman, 1951, pp. 190, 421) thus the assimilated is said to become an undifferentiated part of the assimilating hole. What is to be said for assimilation is that where the person is all of a piece, melded into unity, we are internal distinctions are no longer to be made, assimilation is an apt word.

Such melding of experience is especially evident in psychological experience, where the nursing ingredients of food, for example, become dissolves into a relatively undifferentiated composition. It is also true of many psychological experiences, but those are just part of the total experience. The feeling of being strong, for example, may be based on many personal experiences that, though they have fed this feeling, no longer have any individual identifiability. They are a melded part of feeling strong--just assimilated.

However, this melding is not true for many experiences that maybe harmonize but are diverse and retain individuality. A walk in Central Park, a telephone call from her friend, getting a new job: all part of one's life, but each retaining individual identity in memory or planning, much as nose, eyes, and ears have individual identity while also being a face. That is how it is with self formation also, each self with its own identity, configured rather than assimilated.

In consistency with the concept of gestalt formation, it is important to think of configuration as well as assimilation, since configuration is more congenial to the recognition that individual aspects join into a pattern without losing individual identity. Where assimilation is concerned there would be no point in speaking of selves, which are grounded and configurations among identifiable aspects of the person, each existing with its own identity, interrelated in harmony or dissonance.

c. Tailoring

The third phase in introjection is tailoring, a process similar to the Perlsian concept of the mill of the grinding molars: distracting food in order to be able to

take it in and make it digestible. You can't eat an apple without taking a bite out of it. Though the primal district during process of chewing is developmentally crucial in its literal meaning, figuratively it is vastly more significant.

For more general and lifelong purposes, the term *chewing* is too narrow in the term *destructuring* too one-sided. Tailoring, on the other hand, expands the concept of chewing to include all forms of remodeling, reshaping as well as destructuring.

The tailoring factor is so persuasive a function to think of it as an antidote to introjection would be a trivialization of its key role in people's lives. Through it's shaping up external reality, it is partner to introjection. To the extent it is in good working order, it provides confidence that with skill and tailoring, we will be glad about what we have ingested.

Through tailoring the individual improves the prospects for successful configuration. He does this by rejecting those experiences that wouldn't fit in remodeling those experiences that would fit only if altered. Common means of remodeling are criticizing, selecting, objecting, revising, educating, digesting, suggesting, commanding, and all the range of other things people do to try to make the world of ideas, things, and people harmonious with themselves.

Reforming the Introjected Self

What all of this indicates is that introjection, so long seen as the enemy of self, can work to the advantage of self formation as well. The introjection self, born of the triad of contact, configuration, and tailoring, must be reborn into a new self by the same triad, newly operative in the therapy experience, where the patient's receptivity to new views of self is increased.

Many people are, of course unable to let the therapy in because of their fixed positions, imposed by other people's beliefs, admonitions, and pressures. The task of therapy is to restore the introjection triad when it had atrophied or when it is inappropriately directed.

My task as a therapist is not just to find a pure, original self or to promote an exclusively positive vision of self but to bring to light the variety of selves and to bring them together in whatever point/counterpoint synthesis is achievable. These selves are forced into the background by the surpassingly dominant impressions that have been introjected, that have been force fed. These impressions either stand out prominently, blotting out large elements of the patient's self formation, or they are denied, feared, protected secrets, eroding confidence and creating wariness and distraction, all of which, acknowledged or not, contribute to a person's sense of wholeness and harmony.

3. The Diversity of Selves

Now we shall explore the individual person as host to a *population* of selves and the therapeutic applications of this phenomenon. Drawing elemental experiences together with the fluidity of metal filings being attracted to moving magnets, the person creates and recreates multiple selves. These selves may be either highly generalized or narrow, like a radiant self and a gardening self. They may be parallel, like a doctor self and a musical self, or interactive, as in a struggle for ascendancy between an energetic self and a lazy self. They may be temporary or permanent. They may coordinate well with each other or be alienated, even dissociated from each other.

I propose two primary classes of these selves: essential selves and member selves. Essential selves are extremely enduring; the individual experiences a compelling identity with them. Member selves are in greater flux, more responsive to immediate experience, and often overshadowed in awareness by the larger goal of consummate self designation. Though these two classes of selves have some overlap, there is enough distinction to be therapeutically meaningful. The distinctions are especially relevant in assessing the patient's amenability to change and also in orienting the therapist for the transformation of selves from essential to member or vice versa, as the therapeutic need determines.

Essential Selves

The enduring nature of essential selves make them seem like the sine qua non of people's existence. Some of these selves are highly beneficial because they are positive and fit the experiences that the person has actually lived through. For example, a person who grows up feeling secure may live a life in which her secure self is a guiding force, keeping her steady in a risky world. The essential quality of this self makes it feel an inextricable part of her, not easily altered by occasional contradictory feelings of insecurity. When the essential selves are harmful, they also become fixed firmly in position and resist change. These selves, because they cause psychological pain, become the object of therapeutic focus, calling for remodeling through new experiences. Adding to the problem created by actual harmful experiences, people often jump to erroneous conclusions about the events that create essential selves, distorting any clear sense of who they are.

Under such rigid conditions, even when changed in the essential self may seem successfully accomplished, the person may still feel vulnerable as though living in a psychological haunted house. The deeply familiar essential self, though inactive, casts a shadow obscuring a more current self formation. Registration of current living, leading to new configurations of self, may need to be so strong and so frequently repeated that the old essential self will disappear into the background.

The person with the essential bad-tempered self would have to have many experiences of joking with his special friends before his joking self would seriously register in his own self composition. Bringing member selves such as his joking self into ascendancy may help redirect the patient's areas of concern. The essential bad-tempered self may not be erased, but it occupies a new proportion of the person's psychic space.

One of the goals of therapy may be to change the direction of attention so as to find new focuses more compelling. Thus in the process of reconstituting the self, one option is to discover that the essential self may prove not to be as dominant as originally supposed.

When the environment evoked various aspects of our selves, there may be confusion as to the dominant self. On some occasions we may feel most in touch with a "good person" essential self; at other times we may be more driven by a "tough-minded" essential self.

A measure of flux is inherent to good function--not as evanescent a sense of self as found in the early gestalt theory of the self, which postulated continuing flux, but still responsive and malleable in a continuing relationship with the environment. Even while shifting in selfness according to interactions with others, a person must also feel a dependable core, which will limit an uneasy vulnerability to contradiction. Thus the discovery that the good-person self can remain stable in the face of the tough-minded self is an important factor in coordinating stability and fresh responsiveness.

By successfully facing contradiction, retaining the essential self provides continuity, dependability, a sense of wholeness, a sense of belonging, without the blind restrictions that might negate other selves. Essential selves are always a struggle for ascendancy with member selves that must be brought into the picture with more impact. Let's see how this works.

Member Selves

Member selves have more fluidity than essential selves and more observability in the everyday task of psychotherapy. In a sense they are more field dependent than the essential selves, responding more discriminately to the coping requirements of the environments.

The line between essential and member selves is not clearly drawn, and part of therapy may rest on being able to transform one into the other. For example, a person who thinks of himself as circumstantially kind (thus having a kind member self) may benefit from discovering how deeply ingrained his kindness is, actually a kind essential self.

This sense of multiple possibility in self formation gives breathing room for continuing change. The versatility of self formation is especially useful in relation

to specific themes and their consequent selves. In order to coordinate these selves. The blurring of these selves often accompanies the failure to give them their proportional roles in the person's life and makes integration difficult. This is where the accentuation of a person's characteristics through personification, dialogue, and accentuated awareness helps to restore vibrancy to these partially operative and contributing parts of the person. The therapeutic process is an act of restoration as well as reconstruction because much of personal expansion consists of using what one already *has* in order to become what one already *is*.

Characteristics and Selves

Very important to the concept of member selves and their fluidity is the fine line between characteristics and selves. It is easier to think of characteristics than to take the anthropomorphic next step required for seeing enduring characteristics as selves. One must not be put off by overdoing the distinction, because animating the characteristics serves some of the same purposes as the designation of selves.

Perls, for example, was masterful in animating characteristics; first with the polar top dog/underdog dichotomy, then creating quasi-beings out of any characteristic, even out of inanimate aspects of dreams or personal statements.

These empty-chair guests, although live players in the drama of the self, would not necessarily qualify as selves, however. They may be only momentary players rather than summations of experience. The prime contribution they make to the therapy experience and to the sense of self is the animation they contribute to whatever is otherwise given only routine conversational existence. These animations become more than transitory words when they can talk and have relationship and struggle for resolutions: dynamics not activated by stagnant descriptive words.

Furthermore, by giving anthropomorphic life to clusters of experience, selves introduce flux and fresh detail. Once the dialogue progresses, the relationship of one self to another--domination, missed connections, guilt production, exclusions--is addressed. Then the consequences of this relationship can be examined in process rather than as a stagnant conclusions. The dialogue provides options for rediscovery of possibilities foreclosed by people who come for therapy.

Markus and Nurius (1986) have added to this search for selves by proposing the concept of "possible selves," which extends the versatility of self formation. They take account of the fact that people jare influenced not only by what they are but also by what they believe might *become*. "Possible selves are the ideal selves we would like to become. They are also the selves we could become, and the selves we are afraid of becoming. The possible selves are hoped for might include the successful self, the creative self, the rich self, the thin self, or the

loved and admired self, whereas the dreaded possible selves could be the alone self, the depressed self, the incompetent self, the alcoholic self, the unemployed self, or the bag lady self" (p. 954).

These possible selves are unlikely to be wholly new, and they go in and out of the person's self experience.

Naming of Selves

Naming is an important arm of the process of self formation, since names give selves brightness, recognizability, and implications for likely behavior and feeling. The process arises naturally as therapy progresses. If we don't get the right name, the error inserts a jarring note, much as would an error in interpretation. We are cushioned, however, against the worst consequences of error by coordinating with the patient's own judgment of what name to give the self and by the openness to change the name as the facts call for change.

To illustrate how the naming of selves is affected by the fluctuations in the formative process, let us imagine a person who has the following four characteristics: he is careful in his choice of words, noticeably obstructionistic about things he is told to do, passive in conversation, and insufficiently interested in his work. We might name it procrastinating self, or a lazy self, or a diffuse self, or even a grandfather self, if he associates laziness with his grandfather.

Furthermore, not only is it therapeutically vital to provide an apt name for self and the options to change it when circumstances change, but we must also ask the accompanying question: At what point do discrete *characteristics* cohere to such an extent that we prefer to call them a *self*? Suppose a person pretends to trip over your feet, tells funny stories, turns serious conversation upside down. You may laugh with him or ridicule him or stiffen against him--all simple reactivity to his behavior. That is how most relationship goes: simple engagement of one person to the other. At a certain point, however, these behaviors and the person's evolving characteristics may be so enduringly interwoven and so clearly recognizable as a cluster of experiences as to warrant designation as a self-- in this case, let us say, a clownfish self. This clustering, named or unnamed, creates a dynamic within the person and will incline him to clown, sometimes irrespective of his current needs.

In a sense, therefore, the self has a life of its own, a configuration that guides the person, often without his awareness. This is a familiar function underground personhood, reminding us of the functions of the psychoanalytic unconscious. An important difference is that this underground is more personalized and is more recognizably formed from conscious experience. In therapeutic work, there are three primary ways for the therapist to use this population of selves: dialogue, accentuation, and orientation.

a. Dialogue

The therapist will often recognize these influential clusters of characteristics before the patient does. He may then take an integrative step, identifying these clusters. By naming them as selves, then evoking the stories behind them-- with their struggles, climaxes and, hopefully, resolutions-- the therapist breathes life into these isolated clusters.

When there is psychological disturbance these selves are alienated from each other, leading to fragmented living. By restoring the identity of these multiple selves we can recognize the alienations that occur when contradictory messages, needs, and actions are too difficult to harmonize. This range of selves represents a mosaic of personal characteristics, each self vying for ascendancy in a complex system of internal characters. With these multiple selves as our focus, we may say that when we are working with an individual we are, in a sense, doing group therapy (E. Polster, 1987).

b. Accentuation

Naming of selves has a value as a selective therapeutic tool that goes beyond experimental dialogue. Excessive dialogue may interfere with the necessary conversational engagement between therapist and patient. Naming of selves, even without ensuing dialogue, is also a means for accentuating characteristics and experiences that might otherwise easily slide by. The therapy situation is a corrective for the squandering of experience, spotlighting it instead. People do take their therapists' word earnestly, but the designation of self magnifies the reception through the inherit drama. The designation of self adds a personal stake to characteristics with which the person identifies more intensely.

c. Orientation

The third role of self naming, taking its place alongside dialogue and accentuation, is the background orientation it offers to both therapist and patient. This orientation is a silent partner to accentuation. By itself, it doesn't have the drama that dialogue or accentuation has. Nevertheless, it plays an extremely important role in the therapeutic process. The unannounced recognition of certain selves may serve to increase the therapist's own understanding of the patient, providing informed guidance in the therapeutic interaction.

The actual designation of selves must be only a small part of a therapeutic

repertoire. Otherwise, to overplay either dialogue or explicit naming of selves loses subtlety and direct engagement with the wide variety of content that therapy evokes. Too much naming may result in excess vigilance and self-consciousness, impairing ordinary communication. To talk to a patient about his kind self for example, might represent a silted way of just saying how kind he had been. The technique, valuable though it is, must not be permitted to take over from the ordinary communications that guide people's relationship. Any technical developments must take their place as an improvement of ordinary engagement, not a replacement of it.

Again, to talk about selves seems a strange way to talk about a person, as though these selves were his tenants or employees or internal sprites. Why not just say here is a person who hated the établishment but he was also ambitious and he has overestimated how much he would have to sacrifice his values in order to do his job? Isn't that enough? Often it is, but the repertoire that includes naming of selves will be enriched by the option to broaden and accentuate the workings of the person's mind, to animate the mind at both the conscious and unconscious levels by personification and to foster a special form if human drama.

With the naming of each self, the self becomes an agent if the person--brightly organized; a spotlight on otherwise ephemeral existence; a banner, so to speak, around which the person rallies his psychological energies. Just as the novel creates human images that echo in the minds of its readers, the image of selves also comes alive, giving membership and coherence to otherwise disconnected parts of the person.

The therapist uses the device of the self to give life to his patient's experiences, registering them so vividly that the abandoned aspects may be more fully reexperienced and the fragmented person made whole. Thus the self or selves provide an animated sense of the individual's qualities. These qualities, either inborn or developed, are a foundation for the continuing challenge created by the events and feelings of everyday life.

Excepts from Chapters 1-2-3 of :
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5.

Frank-M. STAEMMLER

Self as Situated Process

The 'Self' has no substance in itself.
(Perls 1997, 50)

In this paper I shall underline Perls' idea that the 'self' is not something a person can *possess*, but something a person subjectively *is* at any given situation and that assumes its respective form in relation to that situation. For that purpose I will draw on philosophical and scientific sources of various kinds.

Part 1

The self is not a thing like a computer or a cardiac pacemaker, and it is neither a *homunculus*[1] nor a "ghost in the machine" (Ryle 1969, 15) that would exist in a person's so-called 'inside' (in the 'Cartesian theater') and exert control on the person from there. Nevertheless, "like the thingness and agency attributed to identity, 'the self' concretizes or substantializes a term whose referents are pri-

1. Damasio writes: „The failure of the homunculus idea to provide a solution for how we know, cast doubt on the very notion of self. This was unfortunate. One should, indeed, be skeptical of a homunculus-like knower, endowed with full knowledge and located in a single and circumscribed part of the brain. It makes no sense physiologically. All the available evidence suggests that nothing like it exists. The failure of the homunculus-like knower, however, does not suggest that the notion of self should or could be discarded along with that of the homunculus. Whether we like the notion or not, something having the sense of self does exist in the normal human mind as we go about knowing things" (1999, 190f.)

marily subjective or experiential and whose force is primarily adverbial and adjectival" (Schafer 1976, 117)[2]. Hence, the use of the word 'the self' as a noun is in danger of suggesting a misleading reification. As human beings "we are prone to act-object equivocations, because we turn a process into a thing, hypostatizing a phenomenal individual where there is only an intermittent chain of events, using 'I' as a designator where it only is an indicator" (Metzinger 2011, 294).

Language affects thinking – and *vice versa*, so as "it is difficult not to lapse into reifying language it is also not easy to really stay with the notion of a process and to avoid turning the process-self – or better – the self-process into a thing" (Portele 2002, 61). Hayward puts it even more radically - "The self is not any kind of solid 'thing', neither a relatively permanent thing, nor a string of momentary things" (1998, 624). Therefore Frederick Perls (1974, 83) once proposed to "write the 'self' with lower case 's' not capital 'S'. Capital 'S' is a relic from the time when we had a soul, or an ego, or something extra special" (1969, 76) [3]

But that was, of course, only a kludge, since both the German and the English language do not provide a useful alternative to the substantive formulation. Nevertheless, I would like to make it very clear that in what follows I do not allude to a reifying understanding, when I use the noun "the self". I rather share Nietzsche's position. He was clearly opposed to any reification and said as much about 'the self', which in the subsequent quote he called the 'I'.

> I prefer to think of the I as a construction of thinking with the same rank as "material", "thing", "substance", "individual", "purpose" or "number", i.e. as a merely *regulative fiction*, with the help of which we ascribe some sort of persistence and recognizability to a world of becoming – as if we were *writing poetry*. (1974, 248—H.i.O.)

One cannot touch a self, it neither has material substance nor a definable outer form, and it cannot be localized anatomically – neither in the brain and its macroscopic structures nor in the neural networks. Daniel Dennett makes fun of those reifications.

> Searching for the self can be somewhat like that: You enter the brain through the eye, march up the optic nerve, round and round in the cortex, looking behind every neuron, and then, before you know it, you

2. On the linguistic aspects of the word 'self' see, for instance, Beckermann, who states "The word 'self' does not have any self-contained meaning" (2008, 61).

3. This statement shows Perls' German origin. German grammar prescribes to spell nouns with capitals. If you adapt Perls' statement to English, you might paraphrase him like this: „We do not regard the 'self' as a noun."

> emerge into daylight on the spike of a motor nerve impulse, scratching your head and wondering where the self is. (1989, 163)

Dennett's irony has a serious background. In recent years many believers in neuroscience have nourished the illusionary idea that almost everything about human beings that has not yet been scientifically investigated may finally be found in the brain. And even some neuroscientists are not aware of how they fall prey to a methodological individualism that is absolutely inadequate when it comes to such a thoroughly social subject matter as the self. "The self comes into existence only over against the group [of other human beings]. There cannot be a solipsistic situation; there must be other selves" (Mead 1982, 162)

> To move forward in our understanding of consciousness, we need to give up the internal, neural microfocus… The locus of consciousness is the dynamic life of the whole, environmentally plugged-in person… Indeed it is only when we take up this holistic perspective on the active life of the person… that we can begin to make sense of the brain's contribution to conscious experience. (Noë 2009, xiii)

Looking for the self in the brain is as pointless as the attempt of trying to understand the nature of language by histological analyses of the Broca- and Wernicke-areas. If one wants to avoid gross reductionism, one must acknowledge "that the body is always in an environment, that the environment is always social, as well as physical, and that the social aspects are simply not reducible to neurons firing in the brain, or beliefs and desires floating around in the mind" (Gallagher 2012, 118)

Not even a localization of the self's neural correlates is possible. The results of serious neuroscience suggest

> that there is no specialized brain area responsible for generating the self, just as there is no candidate region or system at hand that could be made fully responsible for the constitution of consciousness… It thus looks like the entire cortex is specialized for self-referential processing, or, in other words… there is no specialized or common area responsible for self-related representations. (Vogeley & Gallagher 2011, 114ff.; see also Gusnard, Akbudak, Shulman & Raichle 2001; Legrand & Ruby 2009; Uttal 2001)

In a thorough review of the literature in experimental psychology and neuroscience Gillihan and Farah come to a remarkable conclusion that directs us back to phenomenological analysis:

> The compelling intuition that the self is a distinct and unitary entity may have more to do with the subjective nature of conscious awareness, in the sense of first-person perspective addressed by Nagel (1974), than with the information-processing activities of the brain. (2005, 94)

In consequence, if we are looking for the self, the *physical* realm is *not* the place, where we could find it, since neural and other physical structures are only necessary, but never sufficient preconditions for psychosocial processes that belong to a different category than neurological processes anyway. But the "self" is a psychosocial term, and "*psychic processes are without place*" (Schmitz 1965, 6-original italics). "The psychic is pure process in time…'*Die Seele ist nicht befindlich.*' In order to grasp the physical as a whole I need the category of space as well as time, but for the psychic I need time alone" (Buber 1967, 156 – German in original[4]) – one cannot find it in one's head. Therefore all models that conceive of the self in terms of shells, which comprise some "core" or models of layers, in which some kind of "higher" self exists, all imply the reifying metaphor of physical things. Ultimately this is true for all psychological

> ideas that make use of physical associations. They are ideas and nothing else, with which one tries to make the dimensions of psychic experience comprehensible in spatial, "depth"-psychological terms… However, as soon as spatial ideas are projected into our psychic experience without being qualified by critical warnings, even the most astute analysis runs the risk of objectifying illegitimately and of finally losing itself in absurdity (Marcel 1985, 20f.)

The illusion of permanence, that the substantive term of the self can easily evoke, represents another aspect of this inadequate reification. This illusion is linked up with the fact that in their everyday consciousness human beings are 'naive realists' who, in order to cope with their ordinary lives need to take their immediate impressions for real, since under the pressure of their daily necessities they cannot afford to be constantly aware that what they naively take for real are constructions of their minds which have been coined by evolution, by their respective cultures as well as by their individual biography. Hence "we find it difficult to understand that also our self, the phenomenal center of the world, is no substance, but simply a mental model – however one of utmost complexity" (Metzinger 1993, 284), namely one that is reactivated again and again from moment to moment.

You may compare this condition to watching a movie that for a certain span

4. "The soul is not located."

of time shows the same picture without any camera panning, but consists of a rapid sequence of about 30 pictures per second, each of which are not consciously perceived by the observer but which exactly therefore create the impression of permanence "At each moment the state of self is constructed, from the ground up. It is an evanescent reference state, so continuously and consistently reconstructed that the owner never knows it is being *re*made" (Damasio 1994, 240 – original italics).[5] From a sociological point of view, Peter Berger arrives at a similar insight and characterizes the illusion of permanence ironically as

> one of the fondest presuppositions about the self... Looked at sociologically, the self is no longer a solid, given entity that moves from one situation to another. It is rather a process, continuously created and re-created in each social situation that one enters, held together by the slender thread of memory. (1963, 106)[6]

The fictitious feature of a permanent self has already been pointed out by Plato in his *Symposion*:

> Even in the life of the same individual there is succession and not absolute unity: a man is called the same, and yet in the short interval which elapses between youth and age, and in which every animal is said to have life and identity, he is undergoing a perpetual process of loss and reparation – hair, flesh, bones, blood, and the whole body are always changing. Which is true not only of the body, but also of the soul, whose habits, tempers, opinions, desires, pleasures, pains, fears, never remain the same in any one of us, but are always coming and going (Plato 2000, 95f. – transl. B. Jowett)

So we must not think of the self as some-'*thing*' unchanging that would be independent of concomitant circumstances and persistent in the sense that its existence would be given by it*self* and whose 'substance' would remain untouched by the impinging influences.

Just like "all schools of Mahayana Buddhism... refute the existence of an

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5. The phenomenal inaccessibility is an important token of many cognitive processes that does not render them ineffective (see, for instance Kihlstrom 1987). In many cases their *results* can become conscious.

6. This is not the place to discuss the question of how slender the thread of memory really is. To do so would make it necessary not only to deal with the explicit, but also with the implicit aspects of memory. The thickness of the memory thread also depends on the given state of memory and language development. However thin or thick this thread may be, in any case we can presume without doubt that memories, too, are not fixed, but subject to the process of reconstruction, as described by Damasio, i.e. they are subject to *change*.

immutable, unitary, independent self" (Wallace 2007, 98) and understand it "as a matrix of dependently related events, all of them in a state of flux" (Wallace 2001, 209)[7] numerous currents of modern and postmodern Western thought assume strikingly similar positions in spite of many differences with respect to other questions and of varied epistemological approaches. David Hume was a famous trailblazer who wrote about human selves:

> I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement. Our eyes cannot turn in their sockets without varying our perceptions… nor is there any single power of the soul, which remains unalterably the same, perhaps for one moment (1772/2004, 200)

One can find analogous statements in neuroscientific literature following the paradigm of the natural sciences, in the approach of social constructionism (see, for instance, Gergen 1991; 2009), in many variants of contemporary social psychology (see Leary & Tangney 2012), in the writings of the American Pragmatists (see Peirce 1960a, 1960b, 1960c; Menary 2011) or in those that draw on Symbolic Interactionism, the most prominent representative of which, George Herbert Mead, writes:

> The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process (1934/1963, 135)

With all of the above I certainly do not mean to say that talking of a self would be more or less meaningless – to the contrary. We only need to be careful about the significance we ascribe to 'it'. Damasio sums it up as follows "There is indeed a self, but it is a *process*, not a thing, and the process is present at all times when we are presumed to be conscious" (2010, 5 – my italics). So if somebody posits that there is no self, that person is right in the sense that there is no self in the material, physical sense; but that person is wrong in the psychological sense, since every human being experiences herself or himself in any given situation in a respective certain way – except in the state of unconsciousness:

7. This can be seen as an example for the general Buddhist view that nothing exists out of itself, but is always dependent on previous moments and conditions. Therefore, to believe in an independent and permanent existence of a self is an illusion or, as Charles S. Peirce put it, "the vulgarest delusion of vanity" (1998, 2).

> I am partly and importantly constituted by how I feel, by how it feels to be me. I have a sense of my own experiential continuity – I am the site, as it were, of a continuous stream of consciousness that is, in some large measure, a stream of feeling-myself-to-be-the-organism-I-am. The thread of continuity that makes for a sense of self requires consciousness, a first-personal sense of phenomenological flow. (Einstein & Flanagan 2003, 211)

This "continuum of awareness" (Perls 1969), the "stream of consciousness" (James 1890), "the duration of consciousness is movement. Movement is change… Only change itself is real" (Gillissen 2008, 61). Along with this movement, temporality is "*a necessary form binding experiences with experiences*" (Husserl 1913/2014, 236 – original italics).

So in what follows I would like to say some more about duration, experience, and continuity.

Part 2

Temporality and the significance of the situation

> One cannot step twice into the same river, nor can one grasp any mortal substance in a stable condition, but it scatters and again gathers; it forms and dissolves, and approaches and departs (Heraclitus 1979, 53)

In the context of this paper, temporality means that the self emerges and changes from experience to experience and in dependence on the relevant relation in which it finds itself at a certain time, it is both transitory and creative, it elapses and originates again in new form (see Heraclitus's observation above) in the rhythm of the units of experience that are related to successive individual situations.

This implies that there can be no self, whenever there is no (conscious[8]) experience. There is no 'thing' (a self) that could 'have' an experience, *the self emerges from and consists of the current experience*. "A subject of experience is something that exists only if experience exists that it is the subject of" (Strawson 2011, 260). Positively speaking this 'no-thingness' of the self means that the self

8. I use the word "conscious" only for purposes of emphasis and put it into brackets, since it is actually redundant in the context of "experience".

has the character of a process, i.e. it takes its course and changes with time. It is not constant, but acquires new forms depending on the situations, in which it finds itself, to which it relates, and within which it actualizes itself.

Since interpersonal situations are especially important for human beings, they bring out their relevance for the self in an extraordinarily salient way. As everyday experience shows, when paying at a petrol station one experiences oneself differently from the way one experiences oneself when watching a play at a theater, and in contact with the usher one realizes a different self than later on in the conversation with one's escort about the performance of the actors.

> Actually, whenever people are together, from the very beginning a joint situation comes into being that cannot be divided into the shares of the individual participants. We can see this in the fact that often a person almost becomes someone else, depending on what the joint situation is that he happens to be in, because, by becoming part of a larger whole, his personal situation becomes a dependent variable in which self-determination and determination by others fluctuate (Schmitz 2002, 27)

In such a joint situation „a person is not present as an 'I' but as a characteristic part of a 'we' (Wertheimer 1924/1938, 362) and, therefore, is codetermined by the other person and the contact with that person. A poem by Ernst Jandl (2009) expresses this beautifully:

> *I am lying next to you.*
> *your arms are holding me.*
> *your arms are holding more than what I am.*
> *your arms are holding what I am*
> *when I am lying next to you*
> *and when your arms are holding me.*

From the point of view that I promote in this paper, the term "self" "does not mean something that you can define in ignorance of the situation, but something that can only be defined with regard to the situation" (Thomas 1969, 57). The self is never distanced from or opposite to the situation. It is subjected to it. Even more radically, for Sartre the self is "*nothing but* his situation" (1956, 549 – original italics). Gurwitsch puts it slightly differently by saying that the self "*gears into the present situation and has his concrete being only as the role he represents in the situation*" (1979, 116 – original italics)[9]

9. To prevent a deterministic interpretation of this statement, I would like to add: If you find yourself in a joint situation and in a certain role, you are actualizing yourself (your self) under

Situatedness and processuality point at a basic dimension in human life – temporality. For Heidegger (1962), temporality was one of the "existentials" that belong to the human condition, "all experiences flow away. Consciousness is a perpetual Heraclitean flux; what has just been given sinks into the abyss of the phenomenological past and then is gone forever. Nothing can return and be given in identity a second time" (Husserl 1911/1991, 360) That is what Heidegger's teacher had already stated. And William James concurred "*No state once gone can recur and be identical with what it was before*" (1890, 230-original italics). A contemporary German philosopher, Gernot Böhme, puts it this way:

> The human being is alive, i.e. anything he is, thinks, does or feels takes place one after the other. He belongs to the being that never is, but always becomes, whose being consists in his becoming. There is nothing about him that is identical over time (2012, 86)

Of course, one must not misinterpret the statements of Husserl, James, and Böhme as reductive notions of the 'Now'. Without a doubt, Husserl's differentiated discussions of "protention" and "retention" preclude such a misinterpretation as well as his following observations "Every real experience… is necessarily one that endures; and with this duration it takes its place within an endless continuum of durations… It belongs to *one* endless stream of experience" (1913/2014, 236 – original italics).

One needs to be aware that when the above mentioned authors write about the "present" experience they do *not* allude to an abstract, 'mathematical' Now, the minimal fraction of a second between future and past, of which one can conceive, but which one cannot experience (see Staemmler 2011, 12ff). One must assume rather "that the presence of the perceived present is able to appear as such only insofar as it is in *continuous composition* with a non-presence and a non-perception, namely, primary memory and primary anticipation (retention and protention)" (Derrida 2011, 57 – original italics).

In order to be able to be experienced, the present requires a certain *elongation* "No doubt there is an ideal present – a pure conception, the indivisible limit which separates past from future. But the real, concrete, live present – that of which I speak when I speak of my present perception – that present necessarily occupies a duration" (Bergson 1912/2007, 176), since the experienced present always must be defined on the basis of its *meaningfulness*.

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these conditions, but you are not imprisoned by them. Since being "in" a situation implies being able to step out of it "as one who is still something outside the situation" (Gurwitsch 1979, 116 – H.i.O.). — Sartre (1956), too, views "facticity" as related to freedom.

William James has illustrated this with an impressive metaphor:

> In short, the practically cognized present is no knife-edge, but a saddle-back, with a certain breadth of its own on which we sit perched, and from which we look in two directions into time. The unit of composition of our perception of time is a *duration*, with a bow and a stern, as it were – a rearward- and a forward-looking end (1890, 609 – original italics)[10]

Even a sensory Now, i.e. the time span of about three seconds within which human beings integrate different *sensory* impressions into a perception of entire objects (see Pöppel 1985), is still too short to include them into a meaningful whole (see Staemmler 2011). We have to turn to an even larger unit of time, if it comes to the question of meaningfulness of experience: We have to look at *situations*, since for human beings "not things but situations are primary" (Buber 1999, 153). John Dewey explains this as follows:

> What is designated by the word "situation" is *not* a single object or event or set of objects and events. For we never experience nor form judgments about objects and events in isolation, but only in connection with a contextual whole. This latter is what is called a "situation" (1986, 72 – original italics)

In consequence, from the perspective of the first person the actual present must be understood as the *span* of time that is called for by a certain *situation*, since only the situation creates a meaningful whole. "A 'situation at a given time' actually does not refer to a moment without time extension, but to a certain time-period." "In other words, we are dealing in psychology with 'situational units' which have to be conceived of as having an extension in regard to their field dimensions and their time dimensions" (Lewin 1951, 50, 52). Although the duration of a situation in general can be defined only vaguely – situations may vary from about a minute or a few hours to a few days, in extreme cases, it can be pretty clearly marked-off from the previous and from the subsequent situations in terms of the *meaning* it has for the respective person.[11]

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10. Another beautiful metaphor, to which I have referred in an earlier paper on time, is the double-faced head of Janus (see Staemmler 2002, 23).

11. The boundaries of a situation are also called its "horizon". Gadamer gives the following explanation: "Every finite present has its limitations. We define the concept of 'situation' by saying that it represents a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision. Hence essential to the concept of situation is the concept of '*horizon*.' The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point" (1989, 302) – in short: "A situation is nothing else than what you can be aware of within the limits of your current experience" (Finke 1955, 45)

Here the word "present" refers to the respective given "time perspective", as it was defined by Frank (1939) and integrated by Kurt Lewin into his principle of "contemporaneity":

> It is important to realize that the psychological past and the psychological future are simultaneous parts of the psychological field existing at a given time *t*. The time perspective is continually changing. According to field theory, any type of behavior depends upon the total field, including the time perspective at that time, but not, in addition, upon any past or future field and its time perspectives. (1951, 54)

In this understanding of time, past and future are not ignored, but taken seriously in the sense in which they are relevant for the person *in the given situation*. That is the respective "time perspective", from which one cannot escape just as one cannot embark on a time machine. With the progress of time any time perspective changes and, along with it, at least in nuances the memories of the past and the visions of the future change as well. "The Now stands within a referential context; what has just happened and what will happen next, is alive in the Now" (Waldenfels 2000, 131). That means that from any new time perspective both the *psychological* past and future – and, to be sure, the present – are no more exactly the same as from the previous or the subsequent time perspective. Therefore "nothing can return and be given in identity a second time", as I have already quoted Husserl above.

Each situation evokes an actual self that responds to the situation's uniqueness and actualizes itself through it. In Buber's words:

> In spite of all similarities every living situation has, like a newborn child, a new face, that has never been before and will never come again. It demands of you a reaction which cannot be prepared beforehand. It demands nothing of what is past. It demands presence, responsibility; it demands you (2002, 135)

Such a self, which always actualizes itself anew under the given time perspective, will thus never return in a way it was before. The continuous process of actualization on the one hand relates to those aspects of the immediate experience which refer to the directly perceived world of things and animate beings (and which one might call "pre-reflexive"), and on the other hand to those that are correlated with past events, imaginations of the future, with words and concepts (and which one might call "reflexive").

Morf and Mischel describe this in systemic language:

> The recognition that memories and concepts, including those about the self… and other people, are constructed rather than retrieved, speaks directly to the nature of the self-construction process. All concepts are freshly generated or reconstructed not only within the constraints of the system but also in dynamic interaction within a particular context that activates and updates the system. (2012, 32f.)

Perls, Hefferline and Goodman define the self clearly and briefly as "the system of contacts at any moment. As such, the self is flexibly various" (1951, p. 235). It does not have an 'essence'[12] that would be 'true' or firmly established in some sense. "To suggest that there is a single self to which one 'can be true' or an authentic self that one can know is to deny the rich network of potential that surrounds individuals and that is important in identifying and descriptive of them" (Markus & Nurius 1986, 965). Opponents to essentialist concepts, e.g. the pragmatists, basically hold the same opinion.

> For pragmatists, there is no such thing as a non relational feature of X, any more than there is such a thing as the intrinsic nature, the essence, of X. So there can be no such thing as a description which matches the way X really is. (Rorty 1999, 50)

Colapietro radically exaggerates this view. He finds "the conception of the self that portrays the self to be an absolute rather than a relational being… wicked and barbaric" (1989, 78). Thereby he follows his ideal, Charles Sanders Peirce, who asked anyone who claims "'I am altogether myself, and not at all you,'… [to] abjure this metaphysics of wickedness" (1998, 2) These formulations may sound unnecessarily fierce, but one has to concede that in history the illusion of a delimited, situation-independent and true self did not really contribute to inter-human connectedness and solidarity.

The notion of a flexible, processual and situation-dependent self, however, does by no means imply that it would be discontinuous, since at any moment the self is *not completely* different from how it was before and how it will be next. This is because at any moment many parallel contacts are in existence, some-

12. This view stands in stark contrast to essentialist definitions of the 'self', such as for instance, the one by Abraham Maslow "We have, each one of us, an essential inner nature which is instinctoid, intrinsic, given, 'natural' i.e. with an appreciable hereditary determinant and which tends strongly to persist" (1962, 178) "Essentialism holds that things are what they are because it is their nature, essence or definition" (Fuchs 2001, 3).

times in smaller, sometimes in larger numbers. "There is rarely, if ever, a single contact process. This may be impossible. Most typically, many such processes are simultaneously at play in our moment-to-moment experience" (Bloom 2009, no pagination). At the end of a given situation some contacts are finished, whereas other contacts are continued into the next situation.

Here is an example. When I give a lecture I sometimes establish eye-contact with listeners who sit in the first seat row, sometimes I look at those who are sitting in the back of the hall. Here my contacts change within the given situation, but across the entire lecture I am aware of my body, I breathe, perceive the hall, and speak to all listeners. When my lecture is finished and the audience has left the hall, my bodily awareness and my breathing (my contact with the surrounding air) continue as well as my perception of the hall. At the same time the situation as a whole changes – maybe my host meets me to take me out for dinner.

The example is to show that the process character of the self includes both its alterability and its continuity. When I speak of "continuity" here, I obviously do not mean the same as above, when I declared the alleged "permanence" of the self for illusory. Metaphorically speaking, the formations of the clouds in the sky are *not permanent*; they do never remain as they have been before. Rather, they change *continuously*, i.e. firstly *constantly* and secondly in the sense that one formation emerges *fluently* from the other.

In his astute analysis of "the nature of the past", George Herbert Mead has demonstrated the close entanglement of change and continuity which is based on the fact that we would not be able to experience the continuity in time if there was not "a tang of novelty in each moment of experience… Without this break within continuity, continuity would be inexperienceable. The break reveals the continuity, while the continuity is the background for the novelty" (2011, 207).

In this way situations are *connected* with each other. Although they differ, they transform themselves fluently into the subsequent ones. This contributes to the experience of continuity. Not only the experience of one's lived body, as it is exemplified in the continuous sensations of one's breath movements, but also the *repeated* interactions with others that display certain patterns are also constitutive of one's sense of continuity – to mention only two more aspects.[13]

> Throughout our lives we try to establish what can be counted on and relied upon to survive and make sense of being alive in this world. This quest is already embodied in the neonate, and that is the built-in focus on what can be expected and trusted in a world that is by definition constantly changing, associated with a subjective experience that is fun-

13. There are other factors, too, which contribute to the experience of continuity. Here is not the space to elaborate on them. I have done so elsewhere (see Staemmler 2015).

damentally dynamic and changing (Rochat 2012, 430)

So it does not come as a surprise that mothers of infants frequently display relatively stereotype behaviors that they also often *repeat* (see Stern, Beebe, Jaffe & Bennett 1977). This might be interpreted as an intuitive attempt at making it easy for the babies to recognize their mothers' behaviors so that it becomes possible for them to experience continuity in their worlds and themselves.

But also the perception of the material environment, which provides a relatively enduring background for the perception of short-lived ongoing events, must be mentioned here, since "external perception and the perception of one's own body vary in conjunction because they are the two facets of one and the same act" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 205[14]). This is especially true from that time in development on, from which not only people begin to stimulate a person's attention, but also material *things* that are characterized by relative constancy (see Dimitrova 2010; Moro & Rodriguez 2005)[15]

Continuity and relative constancy then form, as I have said with Mead before, the background for the new. "A new situation comes into being, when a new *meaning* determines the relation between a person and the given conditions. The transition can be sudden or almost unnoticeable, but it can be detected" (Thomas 1969, 64 – original italics). Because of its "wholeness-creating *meaningfulness*" (Schmitz 2002, 60 – original italics) the situation becomes the decisive unit of human experience. Its meaningfulness is decisive since it provides the person with orientation for her action (see Parsons 1949/2010, 33ff.). "It is this global presence of the situation which gives a meaning to the partial stimuli and causes them to acquire importance, value or existence for the organism" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 79) Temporality, situation and meaningfulness exist together.

In sum we can say that for the way the 'self' forms it is decisive in which *situation* it finds itself. "Situation is the name of the respective unit, without which a human being does not experience himself, nor can he act or orient himself" (Thomas 1969, 55f.). The time span of a given situation as well as the duration of a self that forms in that situation on the one hand take up more time than what we usually call a "moment". But on the other hand it is not limitless or permanent (which would render the notion of the present meaningless). Importantly, it provides human beings with a horizon without which they would be exposed to an unmanageable number of impressions and to a complexity they

14. At another place Merleau-Ponty states "The very first of all cultural objects, and the one by which all the rest exist, is the body of the other person as the vehicle of a form of behavior" (1962, 400).

15. This begins at the age of four to six months, i.e. at an age, at which "object constancy" does not yet exist (see Piaget 1971).

could never handle. This would result in a continuous excessive demand, since "the life of a person is a single, uninterrupted chain of situations, through which it has to find her way" (Hartmann 1949, 133).

Fortunately, the full scope of the life world never confronts one all at once. Through the experienced structure provided by situations, as a rule of thumb human beings do not have to face the entirety of their lives or worlds, but always stand in front of certain sections only. These sections are, as it were, "*the world within actual reach*" (Schütz & Luckmann 1973, 37 – original italics). The given situation is – between the microcosm of individual sensory perceptions and the macrocosm of the whole life world – the mesocosm that can be experienced directly, that opens up the door to the world, and that makes the world manageable and comprehensible.

To use the words of "New Phenomenologist" Hermann Schmitz "Situations exist everywhere and in various ways; they are, so to speak, the basic subject matters of our life experience" (2005, 22). 'Old' phenomenologist Heinrich Rombach says it also very poignantly "Everything reaches me through a situation… Dasein is its situation. The situation is the basic form of Dasein. Not as an attribute, but as the carrier of all further attributes" (1987, 139) For Sartre, therefore, "it would be absurd even to think of existing otherwise than in situation" (1956, 526)

> Where human being finds itself, is the situation. To what it responds, is the situation. With what it is confronted, is its respective situation. Whatever it encounters, it encounters in a situation. Whatever it has to tackle, it tackles out of a situation and with respect to future situations. Obviously, the situation provides the necessary ground, on which we live and experience, on which we cope with this or that, and on which we appear to ourselves. Hence the situation is more original than the world, for we experience the world only in situations. (Rombach 1987, 138)

Real life always comes in portions – situation by situation, and so the self "appears to itself" always situation by situation. Within each of these situations the activated contacts are relevant for what defines the actualized self. The horizon of the situation defines the limits of the self, for the self emerges from that situation.

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6.

Gary M. YONTEF

The Self in Gestalt Therapy
Reply to Tobin

Editor's comment

It was impossible for Gary to write any chapter for this book although he was willing to be part of this project. So he suggested to publish again his chapter about self despite the fact that it was constantly referring to Stephen Tobin's article. After its first publication in The Gestalt Journal, *this text has been gathered with his other essays in a book, «Awareness, Dialogue and Process», published in 1993 by The Gestalt Journal Press.*

It's particularly important to emphasize how Gary could then act as a pioneer, for instance in objecting that gestalt therapy theory could lead to a concept of core-self, the way some further gestalt-theoreticians could propose. And in this essay, he also suggests some other critics and invitations to future developments which remain of high interest and validity more than thirty years later. J.-M. R.

Original author's commentary

This paper was written in 1983 as a response to a 1982 article by Stephan Tobin in The Gestalt Journal. *In his paper Tobin advocates many changes in Gestalt therapy that I have also advocated, both in this reply and elsewhere. I summarize his position in my paper and I believe the reader who is not familiar with Tobin's article will be able to follow the issues without difficulty.*

In spite of the areas of agreement between us, I felt compelled to write my reply because Tobin's discussion of self, self-disorders, "boundary" and "core," etc. theorized about these issues in Gestalt therapy theory while showing no understanding of the field theory base of Gestalt theory.

It was with mixed feelings that I read Stephan Tobin's article "Self-Disorders, Gestalt Therapy and Self Psychology" (*The Gestalt Journal*, Fall, 1982). I was pleased that my colleague at the Los Angeles Institute wrote such a timely article. I wholeheartedly concur with the need to consider the Object Relations and Kohutian psychoanalytic approaches, to discuss Gestalt therapy treatment of character disorders (and other diagnostic groups), to discuss more frankly failures (both personal and systematic), to discuss the concept of self, and the need to relate the patient's current interaction to the historical-experiential background that gave rise to the present.

On the other hand I disagree with several theoretical statements in the article. Some of these seem important to me, and some of these statements recapitulate themselves in Tobin's treatment approach.

A Needed Shift in Attitude

Tobin advocates a shift toward more realistically taking the patient's character structure and experience into account, listening with respect to the patient's experience, increasing the sophistication of when the therapist shares his or her own experience or reflects the patient's experience or brings in genetic material. Toward that end Tobin advocates assimilation of information from recent psychoanalytic writers such as Heinz Kohut and the Object Relations theorists. He advocates more attention to the relation between therapist and patient and more attention to the needs of the patient as experienced by the patient. Concomitantly he discusses the importance of the therapist being aware of his own feelings and needs so that they will not unconsciously contaminate the therapeutic work. Tobin chronicles and advocates a shift from reliance on abrasive, confrontational techniques to a more empathic approach and from a confluence-phobic attitude to a more open-hearted attitude. In his honest self disclosure of the changes that his treatment failures have necessitated and in his attempt to connect this acknowledgement with basic theory Tobin sets an example I hope we all emulate.

Where I have a problem with Tobin's article is in how he theorizes about the needed shift in attitude. I disagree both with how he characterizes the existing theory of Gestalt therapy, and with how he theorizes about the changes he advocates. His clinical warning is well taken, but I take issue with how he uses this as a criticism of Gestalt therapy. I will discuss Tobin's general description of Gestalt therapy theory and how I regard it as inaccurate. Then I will discuss the following theoretical problems: self as process, self as a boundary phenomenon (not as "core"), sequencing in psychotherapy, the role of the past, and clinical issues relating to the I-Thou model.

Tobin's Description of Gestalt Therapy Theory

Tobin implies that there are agreed-upon definitions of self and ego that Gestalt therapy disregards. He characterizes the Gestalt therapy theory of self as being one of a boundary phenomenon that neglects the "core" of the person. Thus he sees Gestalt therapy treatment as interpersonal and not dealing with core conflicts.

He states that the theory of Gestalt therapy "...fails to touch some of the important self-functions of stability, groundedness, confidence and flexibility..."(p. 5). Moreover, it is Tobin's opinion that Gestalt therapy does not account for the continuity of self as a structure, does not acknowledge that the person brings an existent self of the immediate situation. Rather Tobin describes Gestalt therapy theory as conceptualizing the immediate situation without reference to any existing self.

Of greater importance, Tobin goes on to state that since there is no portrayal of the core existence of the self, Gestalt therapy does not make needed alterations in treatment for patients of various diagnostic groups (e.g., borderline and narcissistic). Further, he draws the implication from *Gestalt Therapy* that "each person has an equally effective, well functioning self" (Tobin, p. 5).

Tobin characterizes the I-Thou mode of Gestalt therapy as an abrasive confrontation that is imposed regardless of the clinical situation. He makes the damning indictment that Gestalt therapy does not provide a framework for therapists to distinguish their feelings and needs as they arise in the course of treatment and that Gestalt therapists are therefore unable to consistently dedicate themselves to the welfare of the patient (since Gestalt therapy does not discuss countertransference, p. 14). Thus, a patient with a self disorder who experiences fragmentation under stress would receive the abrasive treatment Tobin states he introjected from Perls (resulting in wounding rather than curing).

Further it is Tobin's view that Gestalt therapy deals with conscious intention and self awareness and does not deal with the unconscious and with resistance. Tobin advocates more intense therapy and believes that most Gestalt therapists do not see the benefits of more frequent sessions (to increase transference) and a lengthier treatment process.

General Representation of Gestalt Theory

The psychology literature on "self" and "ego" shows no agreement on the meaning of these terms, and in various sources they are used in exactly reversed manner. The seminal works in Gestalt therapy, Perls' *Ego, Hunger and Aggression*

(1947), and *Gestalt Therapy* by Perls, Hefferline and Goodman (1951) were devoted to explicating a theory of the self as process.

In *Gestalt Therapy*, Perls et al. explicate a theory of personality of the normal and the neurotic, and they mention more severe pathology only in passing. Although I agree with Tobin that Gestalt therapy needs to publish more reports of clinical experience with various diagnostic groups, to my knowledge it is not and never has been Gestalt therapy theory that all people have equally sound selves. To believe that all people have equally sound selves would be tantamount to believing there are no such phenomena as psychopathology and significant individual differences in level of functioning. Personally I have found neither Gestalt therapy theory nor my mentors in Gestalt therapy that naive.

In my reading of the Gestalt therapy literature I do not find any denial of the phenomenological reality of the self. Yet Tobin goes out of his way to state that "I believe the self as a *phenomenological* reality" (p. 8). Although some might prefer to conceptualize this differently than "[I am] the same person I was at age nine (p. 8)," I do not believe any reputable Gestalt therapist or theorist would dispute Tobin's assertion of the phenomenological reality of a "self."

As I understand Gestalt therapy it has neglected neither the "core" processes nor the structural aspects of self. The Gestalt therapy process theory of self is far from being a product of "intellectual laziness" or "lingering anti-intellectualism" (though, to be sure, these traits are found in the Gestalt community) (Tobin, p. 9). Process thinking is still unconventional in psychology and not fully developed and requires very rigorous thought. This requires more rigor than the conventional Newtonian mechanistic ideas which Gestalt thinking replaces. On the other hand I believe that when Tobin separates structure from process he oversimplifies and misinterprets the theory.

Of course Tobin has been selective in choosing discussions from the Gestalt therapy literature that support his view of Gestalt therapy, but I also believe that he has not adequately represented Gestalt therapy works that discuss the I-Thou therapeutic relationship (e.g., Polster and Polster, 1973; Yontef, 1981a, 1981b, 1982, etc.). Although Perls was often abrasive, confrontational, narcissistic, etc., and many Gestalt therapists introjected this (as Tobin acknowledges he did), I never thought that Gestalt therapy *theory* advocated this. Gestalt therapy made the transition from a transference based relationship to a dialogic based relationship and the early literature did not specify exactly enough the nature of the desired relationship. There has been much attention to this since, and the attitude changes discussed by Tobin are still timely and needed, but in my opinion the theorizing about the characteristics that delineate the dialogic relationship needs to be more sophisticated than the discussion in Tobin's article if I-Thou is to be a useful concept in our theorizing and in our practice.

Tobin makes several other statements about Gestalt therapy theory that I disagree with. He states: "Gestalt therapy, along with other existential-humanistic therapies, has placed almost total reliance on conscious intention and self awareness" (p. 34). Gestalt therapy uses phenomenological awareness to explore the total awareness process, including unawareness (unconscious), resistance, and transference. I disagree with Tobin's claim that Gestalt therapy does not deal with resistance (p. 31). I was trained in Gestalt therapy to focus on what is kept from awareness and how, trained in dealing with resistance and the unconscious, but doing so with the phenomenological approach. That certainly has also been a major part of the training of the Gestalt Therapy Institute of Los Angeles for the past decade. Tobin states that *he* threw the baby out with the bathwater, but I take exception to his attributing this to Gestalt therapy.

Tobin implies (p. 33) that awareness work is expressive as opposed to insight-oriented. I think of insight as the form of awareness that Gestalt therapy is working toward, although we define insight in Gestalt psychology terms (awareness of the structure of the whole current situation) rather than being mostly historical insight (see Yontef, 1982). Expressiveness is merely one aspect of our insight-seeking phenomenological work.

Self: Process and Structure

Gestalt therapy is built on the field theory idea that structure and function are inseparable and that human structures are process. That stable structures exist is not doubted, but they are conceptualized as processes. Process is rhythmic, continual, has internal consistency, i.e., it is structural. In *Ego, Hunger and Aggression* (1947) Perls elaborates on this process interpretation of such concepts as ego and self. In *Gestalt Therapy*, Perls et al. explicate the self as process. On the other hand, Tobin takes the position that Gestalt therapy doubts the reality of the self, that it has continuity and that it is brought into every situation.

Self: Core and Boundary

The self in Gestalt therapy theory is the person's system of contacts. There is no "core" or "self" apart from an organism/environment field, and no human environment without the processes that we usually characterize as "internal." Whether the self is healthy, neurotic, psychotic or in the range of a self disorder, Gestalt therapy notion is that this is a process that occurs at the boundary. That there is severe pathology, and that some patients deteriorate under certain kinds

of stress is obvious. However, Perls was addressing how we conceptualize that phenomena and it is on this point that I take issue with Tobin.

The greater the complexity and organismic interest in the interaction (not just conflict) the more self that is activated. Some people obviously fragment in the face of stress, conflict, etc. A way of conceptualizing this that is consistent with the Gestalt therapy process theory is that conflict, e.g., in the self disorders, does not reduce the amount of self of the fragmented person as stated by Tobin (p. 6), the *self processes are fragmented*, ineffective, etc. The self is less cohesive, but the self is still the system of contact. This includes internal and interpersonal aspects of the contact boundary functions (self).

Tobin states: "One of the major limitations in Gestalt therapy is that the primary focus has been on the functional boundary disturbances between the person and his/her environment, and almost no recognition of structural disturbances in the core of the person" (p. 5). Later he states: "...Gestalt therapists have devoted most of their attention to the boundary disturbances between the self and no-self, no attention to disturbances within the self" (p. 9). Tobin's claim that Gestalt therapy only deals with disorder between self and other (p. 9) rests on his separating process and structure and separating boundary and core. The problem is that if you create a structure core that is conceived of as separate from boundary and separate from process, one would not recognize the discussion of internal conflict and fragmentation since in Gestalt therapy discussion of process includes the notion of structure (and vice versa) and any discussion of boundary phenomenon in the organism/environment field includes those functions Tobin labels as core.

Tobin seems to believe that there is a core separated from the boundary and that if the core is fragmented treatment must be of this core before work can be done at the boundary between therapist and patient. This will be specifically discussed in the next section. Theoretically and clinically it is one of the most important of the theoretical disagreements I have with Tobin.

Sequencing in Psychotherapy

It has been acknowledged that Tobin's article clearly delineates some needed shifts in clinical attitude. With this shift Tobin has experienced a great deal more success with narcissistic patients. Although my early style was different than Tobin's, I have made a similar shift toward softer, more empathetic, more relationship-oriented treatment, utilizing more understanding of the character structure of the patients. I too have benefited from studying Kohut and Object Relations theorists. And I can confirm

that this has led to more success with self disorders, the narcissistic disorders being only one variety.

However, Tobin attributes this success to a particular sequence of long-term treatment. First he establishes rapport and understanding, then works on the self (working on the "core" and thus not seen as doing Gestalt therapy), then doing Gestalt therapy (boundary work), then termination. I think the label of the self work as not Gestalt therapy is unfortunate on theoretical and practical grounds. It limits one's conception of Gestalt therapy and splits off the strength of Gestalt therapy from this very important self work (Tobin, p. 40).

Although Tobin and I have made similar shifts in attitude and have experienced similar improvements in therapeutic effectiveness, I conceptualize the sequence very differently. Therefore, it may be that Tobin's success is related to the improvement in his attitude and knowledge, as was true with me, and not necessarily to the sequence that derives from his definition of self as structural "core." Although Tobin discusses only the narcissistic personality disorder, I have also found a greater success with borderline and schizoid patients. And my experience is that many patients, especially the borderline patients, do not do well in the particular sequence that Tobin is outlining. I believe that this relates to the theoretical problem of self and "core."

Tobin states that ..."I think it is more likely that a cohesive self is a *prerequisite* for contact with the field, rather than *vice versa*" (p. 11). This is difficult to understand if the self is the system of contacts. And, even if there were a "self" that is a core, how does one nourish this self except through some form of contact? We can debate the form and manner of the desirable contact, but I do not see how nourishment gets in except through some boundary.

The belief in self developing before contact rather than with contact or after contact logically results in a particular treatment choice: first Tobin builds support, then he works on the self through discussion of childhood, then he does Gestalt therapy work on awareness of process, then termination.

Tobin seems to believe that one can treat the person to develop this core self until it is strong and then work at the boundary phenomenon. I do not see how one reaches this core *except through a boundary*. This boundary phenomenon may be made salient or it may be done without drawing attention to it, but to get to the "core" one goes through a boundary. At a practical level, treatment that builds the boundary functions also builds that patient's strength to do his own awareness (insight) work on the relationships between present functioning and the experiential-historical background of the past. Tobin discusses the first two phases of treatment as not being Gestalt therapy because Gestalt therapy is confrontational and interactional and does not deal with the internal self. However, I regard Gestalt therapy as a more comprehensive and flexible system

than Tobin accounts for in his article. For me Gestalt therapy includes emphatic listening, building mutual understanding, utilizing genetic material, using confrontation, and more.

I have found that the picture of Gestalt therapy as primarily or necessarily utilizing a dissonant and abrasive style is one that is frequently held. However, I believe this to be just one style of Gestalt therapy. If one gives up the idea that this one style is Gestalt therapy, one can more easily understand the conceptualization that the beginning work with a narcissistic or borderline patient is boundary work. This leaves unanswered many questions, including the issue of to what degree the therapist should introduce at the earliest stages of therapy genetic material not raised by the patient and whether this must be done by interpretation. Tobin and I disagree about this.

I believe that all work in intensive psychotherapy is both boundary work and work on what Tobin refers to as the core, and that the exact focus varies as a function of the clinical requirements of each patient and diagnostic group and is best derived out of the dialogic and phenomenological work rather than derived primarily from theory. Even within the self disorders there are contradictory needs. For example, the narcissistic personality-disordered patients and the borderline patients frequently need very different clinical attitudes and sequencing. The therapist who has as available background a good grasp of personality theory and psychodiagnostics (including psychodynamics) is in a position to give the best treatment.

My clinical experience certainly corroborates Tobin's view that the narcissistic patient is likely to dialogue only after he or she feels understood and that it is ineffective to confront such a patient prematurely with what the therapist experiences. I would note that in terms of dialogue in Gestalt therapy, I regard the narcissistic injury as not done to the patient by the therapist, nor created by the patient in response to the therapist, but rather that it happens as an interaction between the therapist and patient. The hurt can be acknowledged and *the present processes explored*, thus exploring and building self. Then the therapist can bring in transferential material as advocated by Tobin, can share the therapist's perspective (as a sharing, not as an encounter-group style encounter), or can go even further into the current, here-and-now process. For example, after acknowledging that when the therapist looked tired the patient felt hurt as if the therapist was not interested, the therapist has many choices. He or she could point out the similarity with a parent figure, could share what the therapist actually was experiencing, or could inquire into the process by which the patient got hurt. For example, after the patient hears the therapist's reflection of his/her hurt, and feels understood, the therapist could say: "What did you say to yourself when you saw that I looked tired?" ... "And when *you*

said to yourself 'He's not interested in me,' what else did you say?" Perhaps the answer is something like: "If my therapist isn't interested in me, I must not be interesting." Therapist: "Wow, that is really much worse than if I was bored with you. That really wipes you out. Not only are you boring to me then, but to everyone in the world. That really wipes you out."

If the sequence that Tobin advocates for the narcissistic personality disorder (of working with core self and later working on contact) is extended to other self disorders, e.g., borderline patients, it is my experience that it is often disastrous. For if the therapist with such a patient introduces too early in treatment material about childhood, or even explores thoroughly the childhood material raised spontaneously by the patient, the borderline patient will often experience very intense, primitive affect, but not have the self functions developed sufficiently to contain, assimilate and work through. At the beginning of therapy the borderline patient typically can discuss without affect in the split-off coping mode, or explode with primitive rage or demands to be taken care of without much observing ego, but is not able to bring together the primitive and the adult functioning. Even if the rage does not explode out of control, the regressive pull of the borderline is easily reinforced and results in an exaggerated positive transference, and a year or two later the therapy blows up when the almost psychotic positive transference turns into a psychotic negative transference. If the early treatment of the borderline encourages the degree of positive transference advocated by Tobin, and the genetic material is introduced early, primitive and regressive wishes are reinforced, and my experience is that later in the therapy the patient develops a negative transference that the patient has not developed sufficient self support to handle and the feelings of betrayal are too great for the patient's as yet underdeveloped interactional skills.

By dealing with genetic material only by going through the self, i.e., the contact functions, the patient is able to develop more self to be able to relate to and finish with the past. For example, the borderline patient who learns that one can say "No" without being abandoned, starved or beaten down, and has developed a contactful relationship with the therapist based on that knowledge, is in a position to confront childhood demands for conformity, abandonment by parents upon asserting self, etc. I believe that the boundary work clarifying such issues as distinguishing blame and awareness, contact/fusion/isolation, splitting, etc., should precede any significant attempt to work through genetic material.

Summary: Tobin's theorizing has implications for his choice of therapeutic sequencing that in my experience can be unfortunate. To me the self in Gestalt therapy is not a core that is treated without going through a self boundary, but rather the person is treated through the self boundary. This is quite consistent

with the notion that the I-Thou meeting is the Gestalt therapy path to empathic understanding and is an illustration of the existential premise that the self becomes present through contact.

Role of the Past

It is clear that the past is a background of the present. Perls clearly stated that the past leads to the present (1947, p. 93 and p. 95). Since meaning is the relation between figure and ground, with figure being the present and ground being the past, it is clear that past experience is an important part of Gestalt psychotherapy. It is also clear that for intensive, long-term therapy to be meaningful the patient must develop a sense of past, present and future (Yontef, 1969). That requires the therapist, Gestalt or otherwise, to provide guidance in that process. I doubt that many Gestalt therapists would disagree with this.

Although it is true that the narcissistically injured, defensive patient who experiences no connection with the past gains from understanding how the past led to the present and how he/she maintains the status quo, Tobin makes several statements in his discussion that I disagree with (pp. 26-27). First, because the patient's present is related to his past experience, it does not mean that in the past he was a victim of his environment. Rather, the patient and environment are and were in constant interaction, and the patient brought something into the interaction and also had some role in maintaining into the future the negative effects of past interactions with the environment. However, Tobin utilizes the Newtonian, mechanistic, linear model of causality found in psychoanalytic thought when he believes that the past causes the present, that the patient is a victim of his past, and that the patient had and has no choice (Tobin, p. 9 and p. 26). Second, even though the therapist might hold the patient responsible for his behavior, it does not mean that this is immediately interpreted to the patient as stated by Tobin (p. 27). The therapist can hold a more accurate viewpoint of causality than the patient without prematurely disclosing it to the patient. Thirdly, there is some reason to believe that when you say that the patient could not help how heishe is, the shame may be increased. If the parenting was so bad that the patient had no choice, the patient is then seen as so damaged and crippled as to be beyond hope. Winnicott's idea of the "good-enough mother" takes into account that given a certain minimum of parenting the child is not beyond hope and does have choice.

Dialogue, Countertransference and Therapist Responsibility

Tobin and I agree on the importance of patient autonomy and independence from the therapist. It was precisely this point that attracted me to Gestalt therapy. Although I had previously been in psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapy and had been trained in a traditional psychodynamic manner, I had never experienced acceptance or self acceptance or autonomy until Gestalt therapy. I was attracted to Simkin's "No shoulds" idea.

I think it is unfortunate that Tobin discusses the Gestalt therapy I-Thou approach as if it is something imposed on the patient. His discussion of wanting patients to be independent rather than acting independent because of the therapist's wish for the patient to be independent *as if this desire for authenticity and autonomy is something new in Gestalt therapy* (p. 30) misses the essence of what attracts me to the Gestalt therapy dialogic approach. Telling a patient he or she is responsible for current misery relating to childhood abuse without clinical judgement, tact, or timing is not good Gestalt therapy practice. For me dialogue is not equivalent to abrasive confrontation.

Similarly, Tobin goes out of his way to make the case for withholding some of himself when the clinical situation calls for it, and implies that this is contrary to my writings on I and Thou (pp. 27-28). I disagree with his characterization of the I-Thou concept, but agree that the withholding out of a good sense of what is needed is necessary and desirable and not burdensome unless the therapist's own needs get in the way of the therapeutic task (rather than the therapist's needs being satisfied elsewhere and the therapist being fully available as a therapist). I have always practiced and believed in withholding or expressing myself to patients *as clinically indicated*. Tobin's presentation does not represent my view accurately.

In 1969 I wrote: "For the I-Thou relationship the responsibility question is most crucial. The actualizing model is not imposed on or recommended to the patient; the Gestalt therapist simply refuses to give up his freedom or accept the patient's surrender of his. The Gestalt therapist takes responsibility for behaving according to his own values, but for the patient there is only the prescription: `try this behavior in therapy as an experiment and see what you discover'" (Yontef, 1969, p. 13). If the patient is not aided to develop an autonomous awareness, I do not consider it good therapy, Gestalt or otherwise.

In 1976, I expressed my point of view even more cleaner: "Beginning therapy patients often cannot say what they mean and mean what they say because they are not *Aware*" (Yontef, 1976, p. 4). In that same paper I refer to recognizing the differences between the patient and the therapist, and to the

therapist surrendering to what really is happening between them rather than trying to make something else happen (p. 6). I also refer there to the need for the therapist to be mature enough to be authentically interested in the patient's work rather than being entertained, etc. Tobin misrepresents my previous discussion of I-Thou in a manner that supports his view of Gestalt therapy, but takes the quotation out of context. My writing is just one example of a point of view within the Gestalt therapy literature that already advocates some of what Tobin presents as contrary to our theory.

Tobin models a key element in the dialogic approach when he acknowledges his own past errors and expresses them as a means of improving the field. For me this exciting and useful discussion was marred when he sometimes went on to blame the theory for his previous personal practices, often by presenting a picture of the theory that disagreed with my understanding, and made of Gestalt therapy theory something much less adequate than the Gestalt therapy theory I had always used. For example Tobin acknowledges that in the past his sarcasm toward patients came from his own self and that the responsibility for his attitude and for his introjecting was his own (pp. 25-25). But then he goes on to state: "I think, however, that, as long as anyone works strictly within the framework of Gestalt therapy, in which there is little mention or consideration on countertransference phenomena, it is difficult to create the framework to examine one's own behavior and feelings as possibly due to one's own problems" (pp. 25-26).

Gestalt therapy has stressed since its inception the importance of the therapist's awareness of and responsibility for himself or herself. It is my experience that most good Gestalt therapy training takes this quite seriously. I believe that the boundary approach used in Gestalt therapy practice and training requires that the therapist be routinely open to considering his or her responsibility and role in what is happening and being experienced. This self awareness is not labeled as countertransference since the reality of the relationship, the reality of the therapist's reactions, and the transferential aspects of the therapist's reaction are treated with equal respect. The different label does not detract from the fact that the therapist in Gestalt therapy theory are held responsible for being aware of and responsible for his or her own reactions.

I have found that the existential, dialogic, I-Thou relationship and the phenomenological, awareness approach provide an excellent framework for this training. I learned about my own problems impinging on my professional performance mainly from my Gestalt therapy training. It grieves me that Tobin's fine article and suggestions for the directions in which he wants Gestalt therapy to move is not coupled with a picture of Gestalt therapy theory that I would deem accurate.

I am in agreement with Tobin that there is a lot of bad treatment being done, some by Gestalt therapists, and that many therapists use Gestalt therapy clichés and jargon to justify irresponsible projecting responsibility for self onto the patient. Many Gestalt therapists hold the patient responsible for their frustration, boredom, etc. Many charismatic therapists add to their narcissistic glorification at the patient's expense. Where I disagree with Tobin is in whether this is because of Gestalt therapy's lack of focus on therapist self-awareness and self-responsibility, or because of abuse of the system.

Tobin discusses making Gestalt therapy more intensive than is usually done, an undertaking that I also encourage. For some patients that means more than one time per week. I believe that this is consistent with Gestalt therapy theory, and that many therapists, Gestalt and others, err in not making therapy sufficiently intense or sufficiently lengthy. I differ with Tobin in his rationale that the increased sessions are to increase the transference. There are numerous clinical reasons for increasing the frequency of sessions. This is also true within the I-Thou framework. I prefer more frequent sessions to develop the total *relationship*, rather than to increase transference. More frequent sessions are sometimes useful to decrease risk of decompensation and to increase the intensity of the awareness work. It is important to note that Gestalt therapy can be increased in intensity without trying to develop a transference neurosis.

I was and am excited about Tobin's much-needed paper. His discussion of shifting the attitude in Gestalt therapy toward more recognition of the self and more sophistication in consideration of needed treatment alterations and sequencing with patients with different character structures is a step in the direction I would like to see Gestalt therapy move. His shift toward more respectful attention to the patient's experience and making explicit the therapist's responsibility for knowing the structure of his own emotional response to the patient is similarly a step in this same direction. In the process of the paper he makes a major contribution in setting an example by discussing his own errors as a therapist. Perhaps he will give the rest of us the courage to do the same.

However, I disagree with much of his discussion of Gestalt therapy theory. In this paper I have discussed my disagreement with his presentation of several Gestalt therapy concepts and with several aspects of his own theorizing. I believe his elaboration of Gestalt therapy theory makes it appear more impoverished, simplistic and less adequate than I understand Gestalt therapy theory to be. Although Tobin and I agree on some needed changes, I regard these changes as an elaboration and improvement on Gestalt therapy theory. Tobin's interpretation of Gestalt therapy theory makes it inadequate to deal with what is needed clinically and his conceptualizing of the improvements puts them unnecessarily in conflict with Gestalt therapy theory. The changes he discusses are consistent

with my interpretation of Gestalt therapy theory (an interpretation that I do not regard as novel, but rather in Gestalt therapy theory as I have known it since I was first exposed to Gestalt therapy). However, Gestalt therapy theory as Tobin interprets it is inadequate to encompass these new clinical directions.

Among the key concepts that I would have liked to see treated differently are the equivalence of process and structure and the nature of the self as a process that includes continuity. We also disagree on the relation between self as "core" and self as a boundary phenomenon. I dissent very strongly wherever Tobin's discussion is built on a dichotomy between internal and interpersonal. I believe that such a discussion undoes the beautiful integration of that false dichotomy accomplished by Perls, Hefferline and Goodman. In addition I disagree with Tobin's abandonment of the field idea of the present being the connection between past and future when he assumes a more psychoanalytic, Newtonian stance in which the past not only leads to the present but causes it (with the patient having no choice).

Following from this theoretical approach he advances the idea that one should treat the core of the person and then work on contact. An approach that I have found to be more powerful, flexible and effective builds on the Gestalt therapy notion that the self is the system of contacts and that the core must be reached through the contact boundary. To me all treatment in Gestalt therapy is both boundary and core. From the notion of first treating the core Tobin discusses a treatment sequence to which is attributed an increased effectiveness that may come not from that sequence but from an increased responsiveness to patient needs and increased sophistication about the nature of self disorders. Moreover, the sequence may actually be harmful for some self disorders, especially borderline patients.

Finally Tobin equates dialogue (I-Thou) with abrasive confrontation and compulsive self disclosure and does not see the sensitivity, power and flexibility I see in the Gestalt therapy dialogic approach. Gestalt therapy as pictured in Tobin's model is not adequate to the clinical tasks it faces and necessitates utilizing psychoanalytic concepts to fill clinical needs that could also be filled with Gestalt concepts more favorably treated, such as more intense relationship rather than just increased transference.

7.

Georges WOLLANTS

Self of the Situation

The relationship of man and world is so profound
that it is an error to separate them.
If we do, then man ceases to be man and the world to be world
(van den Berg 1955, p.32).

The subject is defined by her or his reciprocal dynamic relation with the world, that world whose changeable borders are unceasingly set by being acted on. Objects acquire their full meaning only to the extent that they constitute one of the poles of the dyadic, dynamic relation with the acting subject, who, in turn, constitutes the second pole of this relationship. The Gestalt theoretical vision of the world can be characterized as dynamic, relational and intentional.

When we define our client as the whole situation, then this has an impact on the way we conceptualise the relation of person and environment as parts of this whole. We have to re-consider the concepts we use so readily and to make sure that the ways in which we use them conform to the basics of our theory.

The Id of the situation

Awareness is about the 'Id' (Latin: it] of the situation (PHG, 1951/1994) informing me about the present relationship of my world and me. The 'id' expresses the sense of my situation that could become explicit if this sense could be put into words. The 'id' includes many alternative moves. There is no other word for this 'not yet explicitly but already implicitly being aware of

the situation'. 'Id' is the body's way of living its situation. It is the 'id of the situation', not yet differentiated into its parts.

If we think of the living body as capable of bodying forth the interactions of my environment and me, then of course the body is not only environmental information. As Gendlin affirms (1992), it informs me about the interactive process involving me and my environment that we understand as our situation. The body, par excellence, is aware of this whole situation and bodies forth the relationship of the person and his environment. This bodily awareness of the situation implies and generates the next move.

The living body is an ongoing interaction of the environment and me. The living body, as interaction, carries all the information about the situation that cannot yet be expressed in words. At the point at which the id can be worded, this information becomes more and more explicit.

In an approach that takes the situation as the starting point one tends to look first of all at the totality of a particular situation, not yet separated into person or environment parts. Methodologically, this approach, based as it is on the total situation, avoids making the client responsible for starting a non-therapeutic contacting process that interferes with the therapy. And it is to be noted that attributing such an action to the client amounts to nothing less than victimisation and guilt induction (Robine, 2003).

In each situation it is the situational and not the person's individual need that dominates the situation and organises the situation into foreground and background. The practice of Gestalt therapy focuses upon how the patient interferes with the self-organising process of a situation when anxiety and security needs clash with developmental needs and there is not enough support available for the completion of a situational task.

This is the part in the theory of Gestalt therapy in which Goodman (PHG, 1951/1994) got stuck in a dualistic, individualistic and intrapsychic language that is not compatible with the phenomenological, field-theoretical and relational view that he describes in the first chapter of PHG. In fact, through this language he unwittingly reinstated the traditional separation between person and world.

The individualistic perspective variously describes a person as 'resistant', 'reluctant', 'avoidant' or 'repetitive'. Through taking the environment into account, the perspective that follows from seeing people and things as parts of a total situation relieves the client of the burden of implicit blame. Holding back is then seen as a sign of insufficient support in the situation and not a purely individual problem. Refusing to eat and pushing away the spoon that a mother tries to force into her baby's mouth become acts of creative adjustment in a contact governed by conflicting interests (child-mother).

Self: a relational phenomenon situated at the contact boundary

One of the core concepts that urgently has to be more accurately defined and needs to be discussed in a simple, everyday language is the 'self '. 'Self ' is a term that signifies as many different aspects of a human being as there are psychological approaches or schools. It became a more abstract and mysterious concept from the moment it was written with a capital 'S'.

The experience of self emerges as a result of person-world interactions, not as some active executive function of such interactions. The phenomenon of self can be defined as the continuous 'me-relating-to-my-world' as opposed to the 'not-me elements' of my situation. I myself am part of such and such a situation. Many authors replace the words 'person' and 'world' by 'self ' and 'other'. Also, this pair of words can be replaced by the personal pronouns 'me' and 'not-me', which together form a meaningful whole consisting of interrelations, a whole that can be called the life situation. Me and not me can be expressed in more common terms, such as I and other, I and you.

Toward a demystification of the 'Self '

In a total-situation perspective we do not need a concept of 'Self ' as an entity within a person. Such a self isolates me from my environment, and therefore it is a misnomer (Lee, 2002, p. 35). The word self underlines the personal pole of the situation, and the word environment underlines the other pole. When I speak of myself, I refer to me in interaction with not-me. The danger of a concept like self is that it suggests an entity inside me that is identical over time (my identity), whereas we are continuously changing. This self then becomes a created homunculus, a little (wo)man inside, a reification of a process that intimately relates to the personal aspect of my situation. The term self, however, refers solely to the personal pole of the interactional person-world field.

The theory of Gestalt therapy states in the first instance that there is no separated self or a pre-existing self in the form of an entity isolated from the concrete situation of which a person is a part. On the contrary, by using the phrase 'the Id of the situation' (PHG, 182), Goodman again makes the point that Gestalt therapy takes as its starting point the total situation, not yet (i.e. not prematurely) differentiated into what belongs to me and belongs to not-me. The situation precedes the interacting parts of the situation (cf. Robine, 2003).

The theory affirms in the second instance that *self is a process*, a process of becoming, growing, relating, meeting, confining, experiencing,integrating,

signifying, and so on, a process that takes place at the heart of the matter: the never-ending interaction of a human being and his environment. In PHG, Goodman fails to describe this process in process words, i.e. in verbs. He describes the 'selfing' process with nouns. For example, he provides us with the following characterisations: "the Self is the complex system of contact, the system of responses, the contact boundary at work, the integrator of our experiences." (PHG, 1951/1994, p. 11).

When this sentence is cast into process language and the term self is replaced with vernacular, human words (e.g., I, me, myself), the characterisation becomes something like this: I am a whole consisting of contactings that adjust me and my environment (including the others in it) to one another; I differ from the other parts of my situation; I integrate my experiences in the way in which I present myself to others and the way I look at me-in-the-world.

What is conventionally referred to as the self should not be reified, as if it were an internal agency or entity; it is the process of 'me-in-action', a totality of interactions (ibid. p. 151).

Self-actualisation: the realisation of the interactions that the situation requires

When we consider self as the person (which I am) in process, it would be more fruitful if we spoke of the process of selfing, i.e. the process of becoming who I am meant to be. This selfing process is the dynamic totality of me-contacting-and-being-contacted. It is the dynamic interchanging of me and the phenomenal environment. It points to the becoming of a person in the most interactional sense of the word. The process of self-realisation is conceived as realising the kinds of relationships with my environment that are needed in each situation of which I am a part.

Gestalt therapists place less emphasis on the individual as a separate entity than on the person-world relationship. The focus is on the actualisation of the interaction as opposed to the self-actualisation of the individual person. Gestalt therapists are interested in relational actualisation (Hycner, 1995, p. 94)

Gestalt therapy pictures this selfing process not in the inner centre of a person but at his boundary, there where contacting happens, where the me acts on the environment and my environment acts on the me (Wheeler, 1998). Selfing is the actualising of the relation of me and my environment, self-actualising is the realising of the best form of interaction of a person and his environment of which they are capable, given the conditions, restrictions and possibilities of the whole situation at a certain point in time (Wertheimer, Köhler, Koffka, Goldstein).

Conceiving of a person as situated, as embedded in a situation, places all the emphasis on the person-situation relationship. Consequently, such a conceptualisation does not see the self as an entity. The focus is not on self-actualisation, meaning the actualisation of a reified self. Self-actualisation is the realisation of mutually satisfying relationships between the parts of a situation.

The first conceptualisation is consistent not only with Gestalt theory but also with the dialogical-existential approach of Gestalt therapy. We have to be careful not to take self and other as dichotomised entities (Friedman 1989; Hycner & Jacobs, 1995). There are as many 'selves' as there are authentic relationships of a person and his (social) environment. So I can self as a psychotherapist, a father, a grandfather, a colleague, a writer, a man, a lover, a worker, etc., and in all these forms, I can stay with or take leave of me.

Three operation modes

In bipolar and circular contacting, Goodman distinguishes three operational modes in which my self and the world relate to one another: the it mode, the I mode and the personality mode (in formal terms, the id function, the ego function and the personality function). One may rightly wonder why psychologists choose to speak pseudo-scientifically of an id when all they mean is that some aspect of a person's situation of which he is not yet aware is calling for his attention, is knocking at the door of his awareness.

Why do they talk about an ego when all they mean is that there is an 'I' and this I structures my experiencing, this I' does this, feels that, thinks this, decides that, chooses this, or wants, needs, selects, alienates, directs, signifies, etc.? A striking example of the shift from straightforward language to pseudopsychological terminology can be found in the English translation of Wertheimer's lecture, titled "Ueber Gestalt Theorie" (1924), edited by Ellis (1938/1997):

The original German text states:

"*Ich* bin ein Teil des Feldes. *Ich* bin nicht von vornherein prinzipiel ein *Ich* gegenüber anderen, sondern das Werden eines Ich gehört zu den merkwürdigsten und seltsamsten Dingen die es gibt... *Ich* bin nun, sage ich, Teil in diesem Felde... Was geschieht denn, wenn *ich* teil in dem Felde bin?" (italics mine).

The English translation runs as follows:

"My field comprises also *my Ego*. There is not from the beginning *an Ego* over and against others, but the genesis of *an Ego* offers one of the most fascinating problems... Once constituted, *the Ego* is a functional part of the total field... What happens to *the Ego* as a part of the field?" (italics mine).

Is the English version more scientific? In any case, the translated text is distant and abstract, and tends to refer to a reification as opposed to a person who acts and reacts.

An everyday-language translation would be: "I am part of a field. I am not from the beginning an individual I, opposite others. Individuation is a remarkable process. In each case I am a part of a field. What happens, then, when I am a part of a field?" In the Gestalt approach, the terms ego, id and personality are not thought of as structures or as sub-parts of an inner self, but as three different modes of the person-world interactions, seen mainly from the standpoint of the person. The use of terms that are also used in psychodynamic approaches is confusing. Consequently, I prefer to use everyday words, thereby keeping concepts closer to their original meaning.

After all, what is to be gained by the terminologisation of ego, id and personality? 'Ego' is nothing else than the Latin for 'I' and 'id' the Latin for 'it', i.e. what is given in my experiencing of the situation in which I am situated. And personality is simply the organised gestalts that I adopt and present in the course of time.

Simple terms are at least easier to recognise and understand: 'it' is what I become aware of in my ongoing situation. 'I' is the actor of my actions, and 'personality' is the being that I have become and that I prefer to put forward in the interplay of me and the other parts of my situation.

When common-language words are 'translated' into Latin, they may sound scientific and objective but that is sleight of hand, an illusion in which reification and devitalisation play no small role. And in this game of magic, Ego is not the same as I. 'My Ego is hurt' is not the same as 'I' feel hurt, 'My Ego is not strong enough' is somehow different from 'I am not strong enough to handle this situation'. Something has gone dreadfully wrong in this game. In particular, placed inside me 'the' ego is not 'I who…' but a mechanical device that does not meet the requirements of life. What is more, the link with my situation is badly compromised, for I am alienated from my ego, or rather, my ego is alienated from me; instead of talking about me and the living beings in my situation, I go on about my ego and the ids around my ego. The whole matter becomes rather abstract. But is that not precisely my, or should I say my ego's strategy: to create distance from algesiogenic - whoops, I mean painful – forces that threaten to overwhelm me? And the strategy does indeed pay off, I avoid pain, but at a cost: I can not get a handle on me.

Jacobs (2003) suggests that we consign 'ego' and 'id' to the waste bin: "The terms have been abandoned by contemporary psychoanalysis as outdated relics of a non-relational, intrapsychic, drive-based theory of mind. Words are important, and our holistic theory reminds us that words are not isolated entities

that can be decontextualized and redefined at will. They exist in a context of habits of thought, language and action that remain as their ground even as one attempts to appropriate them differently" (p. 139).

We have to get rid of the subparts of a psychic structure inside the person, residues of an old-fashioned metaphor that depict man as a steam engine, and the ego as the regulating machinist keeping the whole thing on track. We have to jettison the notion of self as a quasi-entity inside the person, of an interpretation of the contact-boundary that is conceived as dividing a situation into an internal and an external reality, namely the person and the environment; we have to extirpate interpretations based on contact mechanisms (intro, pro and the other 'jections') that are perceived as transport vehicles whose function is to haul outside loads inside and inside loads outside.

Such is their pseudoscientific nature that when we use these words we regularly have to define them in order to stress that they differ from the everyday language with which they have merged. But would it not be simpler to replace them across the board with other terms, terms that say what they mean? (See also Blaize, 2001, pp. 211 ff.)

In Gestalt therapy theory, the selfing process is the process of bringing about what the situation demands in such a way that the needs of both the person and the environment are met. In this process three different modes of approaching the situation can be differentiated, i.e. the person/environment relations operate in three distinct ways. It goes without saying that these modes transition to one another. Goodman proposes describing these modes as functions, but himself falls prey to the tendency to reify them when he speaks of the Ego, the Id and the Personality.

1. The Id-functioning (it): the given of the situation, what comes up when I am a part of my situation, when the interplay of my environment and me is bodily present, the 'what-is-going-on' of my situation, my environment and myself. 'It' is the global bodily awareness of how a situation is implicitly loaded with sense.

2. The Ego-functioning (I): 'I' is me exploring the implicit knowledge of my situation and looking for solutions, re-structuring, re-organising my situation; 'I' is me acting, choosing, orienting, directing, engaging, thinking, willing, planning, identifying and alienating, looking for, liking, selecting, evaluating, etc.

3. The Personality (me) function is me, as I perceive myself, how I am, how the restructuring is affecting my sense of mastering the given situations now and how it will continue to affect this sense. It is also about how I want to be seen. It is me as I prefer to define myself, to describe myself, to present myself, to let myself be seen, how this influences my interactions with the environment and what I can experience, be aware of or risk. Personality is me as I look at myself, think about myself, the 'I' that I like to present to others. It is also me

who makes constructions based on what I have experienced until now and on my beliefs, assumptions and constructions. Similarly, Goldstein speaks of the make-up of the person (1940/1963, p. 184).

Goodman stresses that Gestalt therapy concentrates on the loss of ego functions, or, to put it simply, the person who presents for therapy does not act as the situation (the 'Zueinander' of person and environment) requires; instead of acting as an 'I' that is responsible for identification with or alienation from situational demands, the person does not respond by becoming aware of such needs, by becoming aware of the kind of interaction that he and his environment can start up, and does not conclude the interaction satisfactorily.

The last pages of the theoretical part of 'Gestalt Therapy' (PHG, 1951, 1994) are relevant to this matter. Goodman says: "Gestalt Therapy concentrates on the process of interrupting the solving of the current problem. The person interrupts the process of identification with what his situation needs, and the alienation from what is not in the service of the development of his situation. The fundamental questions are: 'How can I feel the disturbances in my body?' 'How am I preventing the completion of the task before me?', 'What is missing in my environment or where and how can I bring about what is missing in my situation?'

PHG describes contact interruptions as the loss of ego functions. And he maintains that interruptions differ from one another in accordance with when they occur. Many authors have elaborated on this view by connecting its components with the notion of the contact cycle. When this is done, disturbances of ego-functioning become contact interruptions instead of processes that make effective ego functioning impossible. With reference to his ego functioning, a person has one basic concern: to ensure that he and his environment are creatively adjusted to one another in the situation in which he finds himself now. According to Goodman, the most important question is: "Where and how do I begin not to solve the problem?" (PHG, p. 245). We can put the same question differently: "At what point did I begin not to gestalt the given situation in such a way that that interaction could no longer bring about what I and my environment needed from one another?" "Where and how do the present me-environment exchanges perpetuate the problem?" Gestalt therapy creates a situation in which the client can explore possible answers to these questions. The process of contacting can be avoided or deviated from and can stagnate, but such avoidance, deviation and stagnation are forms of contact. The flexibility of the figure-ground relation is interfered with and takes other forms than those that the situation demands.

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8.

Gianni FRANCESETTI

« *You cry, I feel pain* »

The Emerging, Co-created Self as the Foundation of Anthropology, Psychopathology and Psychotherapy in Gestalt Therapy

1. An exordium

When Jean-Marie asked me to write a chapter on the self, possibly in relation to psychopathology, I was only too happy and grateful to accept. But I soon realized just how difficult it is to describe something that at the same time seems so omnipresent in my theoretical work and clinical practice. Paraphrasing Saint Augustine's words on time, I, too, might say that I know what the self is, but if you ask me to explain it, I no longer know! Initially I thought it was just a matter of sitting down and finding the right words, but then I realized that this 'elusive' aspect was indicative not only of a contingent and surmountable limitation that lies in who does the describing, but it is also a constituent aspect of the object of description: the essential is always elusive (cfr. Lévinas, 1974; Barison, 1990). A more practical approach to writing this chapter would come one pleasant evening, thanks to help of a good bottle of Barolo, when Jean-Marie explained that what he was interested in knowing was if I used the concept of self in my work and, if so, how. This helped to link the issue to my clinical experience. This chapter is my attempt to answer, provisionally, Jean-Marie's query. I am sharing these thoughts in this exordium because I feel that they are relevant. Elusiveness and anchorage to experience are not just two hiccups along

the way to approaching the issue; rather, they constitute a first insight into the issue itself. An issue that tends to elude verbal definition and which moves away, just like the horizon, at every step; an issue that I can only begin to grasp by returning to experience itself. Just as you 'cannot forcefully grasp the sea and the smile of friends who move far away' (Yoshimoto, 1999, p. 286), so a verbalization cannot grasp, capture, contain and crystallize the self.

Within these constituent limits, which I cannot transcend in this piece, I will try to explain how the concept of self underpins my practical work as a Gestalt therapist. This concept, as it is presented in *Gestalt Therapy* (Perls, Hefferline, Goodman, 1951; hereinafter PHG), constitutes the anthropological foundation, psychopathological foundation, and the therapeutic foundation of my clinical work. I will try to explain my understanding of these three dimensions in the light of the theory of self, and how that theory supports me in my day-to-day work with clients and in my clinical research. I refer in particular to the theory as it is presented in the chapter 'Self, Ego, Id, and Personality' in PHG (1951) and developed by Spagnuolo Lobb (2001a, 2002b, 2013), Robine (2006a, 2006b, 2015), Philippson (2009), Vázquez Bandín (2014), Bloom (2003, 2014), Jacobs (2005), Yontef (2009), Wollants (2008), Wheeler (2000), Parlett (1993) and Staemmler (1997, 2009). The task I have set myself is to bring to the fore a figure that is constantly present in my ground—a ground that I rarely think of explicitly, but which underpins and nourishes the emergence of figures in my theory and practice.

2. What is a human? The anthropological perspective

2.1. The relational foundation

'The complex system of contacts necessary for adjustment in the difficult field, we call "self". Self may be regarded as at the boundary of the organism, but the boundary is not itself isolated from the environment; it contacts the environment; it belongs to both, environment and organism' (PHG, 1994, p. 151). The first fundamental element that I wish to stress is that this concept of self shifts the response to the anthropological question 'What is a human?' as it immediately casts us out of an individualistic paradigm. The minimum descriptive unit of the human being is not the individual (Francesetti, 2015a).

The response puts us instead in a post-Cartesian and phenomenological universe. Descartes identified his foundation in the mind as immaterial substance (*res cogitans*), as opposed to the material substance of the world (*res extensa*). 'What kind of thing am I? I am a thinking thing' (1990, p. 27). Phenomenology pivots

instead on the self-evident statement that thinking has a thought, and identifies the foundation of consciousness in the *relationship between cogito and cogitatum*, between thinking and what is thought. For Descartes the foundation of consciousness is a substance; in phenomenology, the foundation of consciousness is a *relationship*. And the relationship between who thinks and what is thought is called *intentionality*. The original relational nature of humans is founded on the intentional nature of consciousness. This simple move shatters the solipsistic isolationism of the Cartesian world view and inextricably grounds humans in an original relationship. It is in and from this relationship that the I and the world emerge as two poles (Husserl, quoted in Wiesing 2014, p. 73). The I and the world are co-original (in the sense that they emerge together); they are reciprocal (in the sense that there is no subject with the world and without a subject there is no world); and they are different (in the sense that they are not identical and they are each defined on the basis of their reciprocal otherness) (Wiesing, 2014).

For the purposes of clarity, it should be noted that in these few lines I have used, following the authors cited, various linguistic references that belong to different epistemological grounds. The concept of organism and environment refers to a third-person perspective, of an observer who observes and describes phenomena in a 'naturalistic' and somewhat detached way. The terms 'I' and 'world' are closer to a phenomenological description made in the first person. The language of PHG belongs to a semantic field that is psychoanalytic in kind and the entire text tends to take a post-Cartesian view, using language that is often Cartesian but which shifts between the two paradigms (Robine, 2006a, 2015; Spagnuolo Lobb, 2013; Philippson, 2001; Jacobs, Hycner, 2009). Looking beyond the linguistic registers and epistemological shifting, what is important to remember here is that the foundation of the human being does not lie in an immaterial substance distinct from the world, but in a relationship. I and the world are co-emergent and made of the same stuff. Other schools of philosophical thought, besides phenomenology in all its various derivations, have also posited the foundation of the human being in the relationship rather than the individual. Of particular importance in Gestalt Therapy literature is the philosophy of Martin Buber and his concept of Zwischenheit (betweenness) (Buber, 1923; Francesetti, 2008; Jacobs, Hycner, 2009). Another school of thought that converges on this point and which seems quite fertile to me, although it has been explored less in our literature, is French personalism, with its concept that the person cannot be reduced to the individual (Weil, 1947; Mounier, 1949).

2.2. Emerging from the aesthetic dimension

Having established the relational foundation of the human being, let us now look briefly at the relationship between I and self, understanding these terms

from now on in the Gestalt Therapy sense and in the light of the process by which experience is constituted. The ego function, id function and personality function are all functions of self. Our conception of self as an emergent phenomenon at the contact boundary (Philippson, 2009; Spagnuolo Lobb, 2001a), is in line with recent models developed in the neurosciences. In particular, Damasio, taking his cue from Pessoa, uses the metaphor of the self as an orchestra conductor who only appears precisely when the orchestra starts playing (Damasio, 2010). This concept is also found in PHG, for instance, when the authors write that "the self is the figure/background process in contact-situations [...] Self exists where there are the shifting boundaries of contact" (PHG, 1994, pp. 152–153). What does this imply? It implies that the me I am emerges from the contact process underway. The roots of my being there transcend me, running deep into a place where *me* and the *other* have yet to be differentiated (for more on this see Francesetti 2012, 2015a). Hence there exists a moment in the unfolding of the experience, in the cauldron where it all takes shape in the senses, in which me and the other are still being differentiated. This moment of the aesthetic dimension[1] is pre-reflexive and ante-predicative, in which there is no clear separation between me and what is other-to-me. We see the vestiges of this process in the words *subject* and *object: sub-jectum* in the Latin means cast down below, *ob-jectum* means cast out there, thus bearing evidence of their not being original essences but the product of the act of being cast into two different regions of the world.[2] The sensorial origin of experience is a vague perception, one that is confused and affectively pregnant, which in just a matter of milliseconds becomes a clear and detached figure, as was described by Metzger (1941). In that original moment, we do not perceive distinct objects yet, but rather an atmosphere, which shapes the subsequent perception, influencing the emergence of the figure and its qualities, in particular its affective and emotional tone. It is a moment that generally is not mentalized or verbalized—indeed, it is not really verbalizable as our linguistic syntax requires a subject and an object that here have yet to be 'cast' and defined (Francesetti, Spagnuolo Lobb, 2013). This process of emergence is implicit in the concept of the *id of the situation,* and, as Robine points out (2006a, 2006b, 2015), it is a revolutionary concept in PHG. The id function of the self does not belong to me alone, but to the situation. It

1. We call this dimension *aesthetic* in that it is sensory; in the ancient Greek *aisthesis* means *sensation* and aesthetics thus constitutes knowledge through the senses (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2013; Francesetti, 2012; 2015a).

2. German Berrios notes how the current meaning of 'object', as something independent, and subjective, as something mental and relative to the individual, only developed during the XVII century with the establishment of the scientific method. Before then, the terms were used to mean the outcomes of a process (Berrios, 2012).

means that the emerging self that in an instant will be mine and will develop an ego function, and which will exercise choice in the field, originally belongs to the situation; it transcends me. The ego function exercises choice in the field and for the field (Philippson, 2009); it is the function of choice expressed by the field, i.e., it is the organ through which the field makes choices. The same can be said of the personality function. There is a personality function of the situation which, before being *my* personality, is an emergent function of the field. An important element to note is that the aesthetic dimension does not disappear once the figure is defined. The definition of the figure continues and adds to this original sensory level, thus modifying the experience. As many authors who have worked on development have stressed (Stern, 1985), subsequent stages add to and do not replace the previous. In therapy, we often need to return to the senses to re-find, re-orient, re-emerge and re-create ourselves and restore the atmospheric tone of the encounter.

Since it is a ante--predicative and pre-reflexive moment, where subject and object have yet to defined, the translation of this experiential moment into language cannot be taken for granted. When language does manage to latch onto this moment, it becomes poetry (PHG, Ch. 7); some specific creative adjustments witnessed in psychotic experience (delusions and hallucinations) are also attempts to express what is unspeakable. Madness is thus seen clearly here as the unfortunate relation of poetry (Clemens Brentano, quoted in Béguin, 1939). Another difficulty encountered in trying to describe this moment is tied to our own culture. PHG talk about a 'disease of language' which permeates modern Western culture (PHG, 1994, p. 155 footnote), which has lost the *middle mode,* a grammatical structure present in Greek which describes an experience that falls neither entirely with the subject or the object, but which lies in a middle realm where the subject and object play and are played with, and which would be able to express the co-originality and reciprocity of me and the world (Sichera, 2001; Francesetti, 2012, 2015a). This language disease expresses a cultural disease, of having lost sight of the phenomena that populate the middle realm and which are not ascribable or reducible to an event that is neither subjective or objective. A verbal form is lacking to describe its spontaneity, for it is 'both active and passive [...] it is middle in mode, a creative impartiality' (PHG, 1994, p. 154). The human being lives in and comes from this dimension, but our culture does not help us grasp it or convey it. Even for the therapist it is not easy to grasp this dimension. In the cauldron of the senses where the origin of experience gushes and spouts—the aesthetic cauldron, the task of the therapist is to grasp the atmosphere generated and that generates, which she co-creates with the client. In this way she grasps the phenomenological field that is emerging and that shapes the figure/ground process which is started up in the therapeutic encounter. This task is an aesthetic task. Aesthetic evaluation is immediate, pre-reflexive and

ante-predicative, judging neither oneself nor the other but what happens and emerges at the contact boundary. The criterion used in making this evaluation is intrinsic to contact itself, and does not require measurement against an external standard (PHG, Ch. IV, § 13; Bloom, 2003; Robine, 2006b; Spagnuolo Lobb, 2013; Francesetti, 2012; Tellenbach, 2013). It gives the clinical worker the chance not to evaluate the patient, because what is evaluated is the process of figure formation, the *Gestaltung:* this is what we evaluate, this is what we treat. And this is why our approach is called Gestalt Therapy, because what we support is the formation of the Gestalt at the contact boundary (Francesetti, 2012, 2015a). Perls' call to 'go back to your senses' thus becomes, in this framework, an invitation to step up to the contact boundary and not descend introspectively into oneself. The place where we encounter ourselves is at the boundary where me and the other co-emerge: the contact boundary. 'The deepest part of ourselves is the skin' ("Ce qu'il y a de plus profond en l'homme, c'est la peau", Paul Valéry, 1931).

2.3. Intentionality for contact

A third element that I would like to stress, to be able to respond to the anthropological question starting from a Gestalt Therapy understanding of self, is the concept of intentionality for contact. In PHG, self is the agent of growth; it is what makes the encounter with novelty, excitement and growth (the three words that subtitle the book) possible. The foundational text does not provide a clear definition of growth and often it seems to talk about growth as a phenomenon pertaining solely to the organism ('An organism preserves itself only by growing', PHG, 1994, p. 151). There is one passage, however, which shifts the lens once again from an individualistic perspective to a field perspective: 'The field as a whole tends to complete itself, to reach the simplest equilibrium possible for that level of field. But since the conditions are always changing, the partial equilibrium achieved is always novel; it must be grown to" (PHG, 1994, p. 151). Here we see that the organism's growth is a function of the field: '*it must be grown to*'. The organism, therefore, can and must grow in relation to the potential of the field—the further away the field is from equilibrium and the more elements there are that push for change, thus making it pregnant with potential, the more the organism is called on to grow. The impetus for contact, the drive towards the next, is thus an impetus that emerges from the field and leads towards the creative realization of the potentiality at play in the field, and which ultimately results in the growth of the organism and a new equilibrium for the field. Growth is not a response to an individual urge, but the outcome of a call of the field. The way in which the organism senses and expresses that call is its *'intentionality for contact.* It is an impetus towards contact that arises from

the impetus within the field towards a new equilibrium. The term *intentionality* comes from the Latin *in-tendere*: tuning an instrument, making its strings resonant with the heart. It expresses the impetus that emerges in me when I am attuned to the drive for change present in the actualizing field. When the ego function adopts this impetus as its own, intentionality becomes deliberate intention and action, but as it emerges the intentionality belongs to the id and the personality of the situation, for it is the expression of the potentiality that pushes for their transformation. But how do we perceive the impetus of potentiality, the unfolding of the process? How do we sense that a new equilibrium has been reached and that we have grown to it? The criterion is aesthetic and intrinsic; the task is an aesthetic one (Francesetti, 2012). What guides the process is the sense that a good *Gestalt* is being created, that it is going in a good, beautiful, clear, energetic, bright and fair direction. It is not about avoiding pain or effort; good health is not well-being (in the sense of being without pain), but presence. The ego function helps us to decide how to respond creatively to the call that comes from the field, but the elements that mark out the road to be taken in a given situation are not just subjective. The call comes from the field and it is the intrinsic criterion that points out the specific way to proceed; it is unique and different for each of us, but it is not subjective in a relativistic sense—it is a contextual *phronēsis.* Freedom consists in accepting the call; it is exercised by becoming engaged with the given situation. To not be engaged is not actually a choice but the diminishment of presence, and hence the diminishment of integrity and freedom[3] (Bloom, 2005). Understood this way, freedom gives rise to audacity, which is the courage to be fully present. Choice is a matter concerning how to be present at the moment when we are attuned with the potentiality of the field. Missing the call is not a choice, it is absence—it is psychopathology. "Self is spontaneous, middle in mode [...] and engaged with its situation" (PHG, 1994, p. 154). In *Troubled Sleep by* Sartre (1949), at the end of the story the main character, ineffectual up till that moment, takes the clamorous and audacious decision to defy the Nazi occupation. It is the redemption of his entire life, the response to a call evaded up till that moment, a decision that is the only choice possible to be present in full and with integrity.[4]

This perspective puts us in a position to radically critique our consumerist

3. That the exercise of freedom should consist in becoming engaged can seem paradoxical in our cultural climate. In Ancient Greece, by contrast, it was obvious: for Aristotle, the free man is he who is bound; the slave is he who is not bound and therefore can be bought, sold and transferred. The free man is rooted and bound, and it is precisely because of this that one cannot do as one would like with him (Benasayag, Schmit, 2006).

4. "The choosing makes the individual, rather than the individual making the choice!" (Philippson, 2009, p. 7).

culture of 'affluence', where we are driven to pursue pleasure and avoid pain, on the presumption that all choices are relativistically equivalent (Bauman, 1999)—to the detriment of presence. The fallacy lies in believing that we must strive for affluence and that we can be happy and fulfilled by purchasing goods and material beauty [5] thereby avoiding all pain, as though the latter were some accident of the human condition that can be side-stepped. Rather, what makes us feel fully alive and with integrity is not being anaesthetised, or *diverting*[6] from pain, nor material beauty, but being fully present. In our world, pain and beauty are channelled into objects, bearing witness to their absence and to our own absence. Today, it is very often proposed, as something innovative, that psychotherapy should be committed to preventing suffering and promoting well-being, but if it is not made clear what kind of well-being we are talking about, we risk merely contributing to the dominance of a misleading consumerist culture. We need to promote a culture of presence—which implies effort, loyalty, creativity and pain—rather than a culture of affluence.

The intrinsic criterion is aesthetic in the sense that it in-tends-towards, or leads us towards, emergent beauty—the beauty that emerges and is co-created at the contact boundary through the process of figure/ground formation. As I explained in a previous work (Francesetti, 2012; 2015a), the transformation of absence into presence at the contact boundary can be perceived as emerging beauty. The impetus of the field is an impetus to tie up loose processes, the *unfinished business* that awaits the right moment for completion. Unfinished business does not just belong to the client; it is co-created and actualized at the contact boundary through the backgrounds of the client and the therapist and through the actual situation in the encounter. The transformation of absence into presence, of pain into beauty, represents the fulcrum of the impetus for contact. It is a process that has nothing to do with material beauty, intelligence quotients, the quality of experience (whether psychotic or neurotic), biological age, learning and culture, or any other condition. It is solely a function of presence. The degree of potential presence is higher the more invalidating the person's experience has been, the more being at the contact boundary has been painful and hampered, the more they have been marginalised, humiliated or excluded. Here discarded rubble becomes a cornerstone; here we can appreciate how the 'small' and minorities are the bearers of great truths (Francesetti, 2013). This clinical perspective helps us restore to clients the dignity of their suffering (Jacobs, 2005). Here aesthetics and ethics take shape together (Bloom, 2005; 2013).

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5. '*Material beauty*' is beauty collapsed in objects, as opposed to emergent beauty, which arises at the contact boundary and is fleeting.

6. From the Latin, *di-vertere*, "to turn apart "(Oxford English Dictionary).

3. What is suffering? The psychopathological perspective

There are many diverse and varying views of psychopathology. One view, prevalent in the medical world, considers psychopathological disorders to be cerebral dysfunctions; another considers mental illness to be a social construct. Others seek to be consistent with a bio-psycho-social world view (Civita, 1999; Gelo *et al.*, 2014). In some previous works, we sought to develop a psychopathological perspective consistent with the principles of Gestalt Therapy in both theory and practice (for more on this see Francesetti, Gecele, 2009; Francesetti, Gecele, Roubal, 2013; Francesetti 2012, 2015a). This perspective takes a holistic approach, and hence is bio-psycho-social; it is a field approach, and hence radically relational; it is deconstructive, and so takes into account the nosology so as to transcend it; and it is aesthetic because it considers suffering to be co-created in the here and now of the encounter and actualized through absence at the contact boundary. Here I want to focus in particular on how the conception of self that we find in PHG underpins the development of a perspective of this kind. The foundational text explores and presents a view of neurosis that is innovative compared to psychoanalysis. It outlines the social and biological motives, the clinical phenomenology and the treatment for it, both working with and breaking with psychoanalysis and, more indirectly, with the medical models of the time. It does not, however, develop a systematic understanding of psychopathology or deal with psychotic or sociopathic experience, except in a tangential way.

Given the premises set out in §2, it can be said that psychopathological suffering emerges from the field and is actualized as absence at the contact boundary. It is a simple statement to make, but one full of important consequences. The individual expresses through the self a suffering that comes from the field and preserves its evolutionary impetus. This leads him to actualize the suffering in his relationships and to seek opportunities to transform it in the encounter. To preserve so as to transform: this is the faithful and creative task of the sufferer. But the sufferer does not necessarily feel in a subjective way that he is suffering. If suffering is absence, and hence anaesthetization, it can happen that the suffering present in the field is only perceived by others. The partner of a man with narcissistic experience may feel the suffering of his absence without him perceiving it at all. His therapist may feel inadequate or, in self-defence, consider the patient to be inadequate, and maybe even humiliate him. In a field perspective, in the therapy situation we do not focus on the fact that the client is vulnerable to humiliation; rather we feel that in the field that together we co-create there is a vulnerability to humiliation which may emerge in him or

in me. The suffering lies in the psychopathological field that is co-created and emerges in various ways in the subjects that co-create it. This perspective helps us become aware of the suffering that actualizes and circulates in the field, and helps us to avoid playing on it in a confluent way by being self-defensive and attributing it entirely to the client.

We said that the psychopathological field is an experiential field that conveys absence in the encounter, an anaesthetization at the contact boundary. This field is actualized in the here and now of the encounter as an ecstasy[7] of the situation, and hence of the lived bodies in the here and now of the situation. The field emerges as an atmosphere—here I use the term with the connotations given to it by Hermann Schmitz, the founding author of New Phenomenology in philosophy (Schmitz, 2011; Böhme, 2010; Griffero, 2014). Atmosphere is a phenomenon that is neither subjective or objective, which occupies the diffuse, surfaceless space between and around subjects. It is discontinuous in time, it changes. For Schmitz, atmospheres, like the phenomena of the lived body, are half-entities, as their status cannot be reduced to either subject or object; they exist in the betweenness. Psychopathological fields appear atmospherically in different ways. For instance, in a depressive field, the phenomena that emerge are attuned to the experience of the unreachableness of the other; in a field marked by trauma, the phenomena that emerge are attuned to multiple dissociations.

To embrace such a conception, the therapist needs to be open to considering in what way he himself contributes to creating the suffering encountered. It is a perspective that requires the therapist to be willing to question himself in every encounter and to have the humility to become part of the very fabric he is called upon to heal. Here I refer to humility not only in an ethical sense, but also in its literal meaning—humble (from the Latin *humus,* 'soil') describes a person who is close to the ground, where roots sprout and are embedded. The fundamental task of grasping an emerging absence, and hence the characteristics of a psychopathological field, is an aesthetic task. Considered this way, psychopathology is deconstructive, and the suffering expressed by the individual finds a pathway to return to the field to which it belongs. For this to happen, the pathway passes through the contact boundary—it is here that suffering is actualized in the therapeutic encounter and it is here that therapy takes place.

Only a conception of self that allows us to transcend the individual, to firmly ground her in the relationship and to take on a radical field perspective can help us develop a psychopathology specifically rooted in Gestalt Therapy.

This epistemology also enables us to develop an understanding of severe suffering which the foundational text does not explore: psychotic experience (for

7. Being put out of place, from Late Latin *extasis*, from Greek *ekstasis*, from *eksta-* stem of *existanai* put out of place, formed as *ex-* + *histanai* to place (Oxford English Dictionary).

more on this see Francesetti, Spagnuolo Lobb, 2013; Burley, 2015[8]; Francesetti, 2015b) and sociopathic experience (Francesetti, 2012).

In §2.2 we said that the subject is a product of a process of emergence from an undifferentiated ground. This process implies the plotting of boundaries between subjectiveness and otherness, which serve the dual function of distinguishing and connecting. In this way, the subject emerges and instinctively feels distinct from the world, but at the same time feels it has a place in, and belongs to, the world. The disturbance of this process, and the resulting alteration of the functions of the boundary, is what characterises psychotic experience. If the disturbance chiefly concerns the function of distinguishing the self from the other, experience will be situated in the schizophrenic spectrum. If it is chiefly the function of connection that is disturbed, experience will belong to the depressive and manic spectrum. If both functions are disturbed, the mixed experience of schizoaffective psychosis will emerge (Francesetti, Spagnuolo Lobb, 2013; Francesetti, 2015b). An understanding that focuses on the co-creation of this boundary disorder opens up important roads for therapy, which enable the therapist not to dissociate herself from the psychotic field (with all the iatrogenic risks that would entail) and to grasp the message of relational truth that it holds.

Even sociopathic experiences, which represent one of the toughest challenges for the psychotherapist, find meaning within a field perspective. A person with sociopathic experience bears a field of suffering that she cannot feel firsthand, and to actualize it needs another person, the victim. To paraphrase Simone Weil (1947), the victim feels in himself that pain that the executioner cannot feel. Through the victim, the executioner brings out the suffering that she bears. In a field that expresses sociopathic suffering, this drama is reactualized; in therapy, the anaesthetization towards one's own suffering and the impetus to bring it out through the other often permeates the encounter. The therapist often can slip easily into this mechanism and may feel a desire to make the other person suffer, with the risk of naively believing that this experience is a good direction for therapy to take. Naturally, we might agree on the fact that an objective of therapy might be for the client suffering from sociopathy to be able to feel pain, but it is a step fraught with danger. The therapist himself risks instigating the suffering that characterises the field (which he, if not self-aware, will attribute solely to the client), so that it will be the other who suffers.

Focusing on the field rather than the individual also helps give us a clearer understanding of phenomena of mass sociopathy. Studies of single individuals who have participated in criminal social movements usually do not find any evidence of psychopathology in a classical sense. This is the banality of evil as Hannah Arendt (1963) spoke of it, as she noted, dumbfounded, how ferocious

8. See Todd Burley *et al.*, in the *Gestalt Review* issue dedicated to schizophrenia (2015, vol. 19, no 1).

Nazis were also, for instance, caring fathers, or the 'Lucifer Effect' of Zimbardo's studies (2008), which look at how perfectly 'well-adapted' people in normal situations can become, in other contexts, so surprisingly violent and indifferent towards the evil inflicted on others. If we look at the individual we cannot understand this behaviour; all we can do is put it down to some generic anthropological tendency for humans to be evil. This certainly helps to put us on guard and know that we, too, can be evil in certain conditions. A field perspective, however, can help take us a step further. It is not really the individual taken on her own that can help us understand how evil emerges. There is a broader and more fundamental dimension from which evil emerges, where the field in which the individual is immersed makes him suffer – it is a field of *pathos*, in the etymological sense (sharing a root with passive and passion). If he is not sufficiently aware and audacious enough to differentiate himself, the individual expresses the evil present in the co-created field. The more the social field is full of passion, the more individuals passively suffer from it. And the more audacious the individual has to be to differentiate himself. The aesthetic task is to grasp the climate, the atmosphere, of what happens in the social field before certain events actually take place. Perhaps it was this instinct that led Fritz Perls and his wife Laura to flee Germany in 1933, first for the Netherlands, and then South Africa, thus saving themselves from the death camps (Bocian, 2012). It is possible that it sharpened Fritz Perls's aversion to confluence in general, and to attunement to what emerges in the field, which is a central element of therapy. He had experienced firsthand the risks of non-differentiation, which led him to adopt a stance of early differentiation in therapy (Robine, 2006a) and a style that could be more confrontational than empathetic (Yontef, 2009).

A field perspective lets us view the phenomena of suffering as being co-created in each therapy session, and hence not as fixed and crystallized. By focusing on the process of co-creation, the therapist, therefore, has some margin for intervention—a margin at least as big as her own contribution to the psychopathological field that is actualized.

4. What is therapy? The therapeutic perspective

What are the therapeutic consequences of this approach to understanding psychopathology? If we take the object of psychopathology to be the field, not the individual, "this shifts the epistemological ground of psychopathology itself, in the definition, understanding and treatment of suffering. Thus I assert that it is not in the client that we should locate suffering, but rather we should regard it as an emergent phenomenon at the contact-boundary. Accordingly, if

psychopathology is an absence at the boundary and the boundary is a co-created phenomenon, there can be no psychopathology of the isolated individual or mind. As a consequence, the therapist does not 'work on the client', but in the field that is actualized between the therapist and client. Given that this field is co-created, the therapist works primarily on himself and on modulating his presence and absence at the contact-boundary" (Francesetti, 2015a, p. 7).

With a client with depressive experience, for instance, the field perspective enables the therapist to move from the question 'What can I do for such a depressed client?' to 'How are we depressing together right now?' (Roubal, 2007; Francesetti, Roubal, 2013; Francesetti, 2015a). It is precisely the element of co-creation that gives the therapist margin for therapy, as minimal as it can sometimes be. Since the therapist himself is part of the id and the personality of the situation (Robine, 2006a), he will always be able to effect a choice (ego function) that is rooted in the here and now of the situation and is an expression of the intentionalities at play in the field.

The task of the therapist is to be present as absence is actualized in the encounter. Being present means: grasping the way the absence is co-created also by her, herself; echoing in her own lived body, and hence feeling, the pain that the absence implies (and has implied and will imply) for the client; feeling the fatigue of having had to sustain the absence and how much pain and deprivation it has provoked in her own life and for those who are close to her; grasping the broader background—the social and transgenerational relational fabric—from which the suffering comes (Francesetti, 2016); grasping the way the absence has contributed to making that life possible and to the development of specifically unique and excellent qualities; grasping how bearing the suffering up to this point is a form of loyalty to the relational fabric of the life that is now asking to be transformed, finally; and feeling how the suffering belongs to a possibility of being in the world, to which the therapist herself is no stranger. To do all this, the therapist relies on her aesthetic sense (Robine, 2006b; Francesetti, 2012, 2015a; Spagnuolo Lobb, 2013), on her capacity for kinaesthetic resounding (Frank, 2001), for inclusion (Yontef, 2009), for cultivating uncertainty (Staemmler, 1997), and for attunement (Stern, 2010).

Being present does not, therefore, entail *changing* the client[9] or *working on* him. It means modulating one's presence to be present as the absence is

9. Thinking that it is the client who has to change inevitably implies the judgement that the client himself or his way of being is inadequate, which raises a number of risks, as it can be a source of shame for the client (Robine, 2013; Lee, Wheeler, 1996; Yontef, 2009), but it can also be a way for the therapist to avoid confronting his own inadequacies, offloading them onto the client and shaping an abusive field in which what is adequate is attributed to him and what is inadequate is attributed to the client.

actualized. What emerges from the quality of presence is the intentionality for contact borne within the suffering itself, which the client has never wanted to abandon. The call to contact can now take shape and will find unique ways to emerge that depend on the situation and the characteristics of the therapist and the client. Here a new relational experience emerges, one anticipated ever since the intentionality for contact could find no relational outlet and was encapsulated in suffering—a suffering that bears witness to defeat but also to perseverance. The new experience is an embodied one, where the body actively participates and is vibrant, and may be conveyed through a glance, a word, or a gesture. Presence becomes living body. The Gestalt Therapy approach enables experiential form to be given to the act of being present as absence emerges and as intentionality for contact emerges. Working on the lost and refound gesture, which embodies and frees the intentionalities for contact in play, is built on this previous act of being present as absence emerges. Without this attunement to the potentiality and call of the field that is actualized, without this pregnant moment, the experiment risks being an empty or artificial technique.

When the therapist is present as the absence is actualized, the absence becomes present, and in that moment it is no longer absence, enabling intentionality to emerge and time to become fertile for new experience. The paradoxical theory of change (Beisser, 1970) is not longer paradoxical when seen in this light.

We can also observe that the reach of therapy transcends the single individual. Changing a psychopathological field means treating the actualization of an absence, which will have a vertical, generational fallout. Fields of suffering are actualized and transmitted from generation to generation. Modifying a psychopathological field means mending part of the relational fabric of the world passed down by history and by previous generations, and lightening the load for future generations. Research into the intergenerational transmission of traumas suggests that what is not transformed is transmitted (Mucci, 2014; Francesetti, 2016).

Therapy is thus an arena for social change and investment in the future (Francesetti, 2012; Robine, 2015).

5. 'You cry, I feel pain'. A clinical example

I will now present the transcript of the first part of a session within a training group. My aim is to illustrate a way of working based on an aesthetic approach and a field perspective, in which individual experiences are considered co-created and their meaning attributed in the light of the emerging field. Intentionalities for contact are gradually revealed and a journey is experienced which, by

actualizing absence and by being present as absence emerges, leads to presence. This kind of perspective is possible thanks to the conception of self described in PHG. In this chapter I have sought to show how it underpins my understanding of human beings, of psychopathology and of therapy; with this example, I hope to anchor it a little more to clinical experience.

In a workshop in Ukraine, Elèna asks for personal work.

As soon as we sit down in front of each other, a sort of anaesthesia pervades me. I feel both turned to stone and lightweight at the same time. Or I could say absent and cold. Elèna observes me, without moving herself, apparently without intentionality. Between us everything is immobile. Not heavy, like in a depressive field, just immobile; I feel we are absent with each other. I look for some possible movement, but I have no direction.

I lean on the emergent sense of the situation:

G. '*Elèna, what drove you to ask for work?*'

E. '*Um… I find it impossible to stay with the group… to pay attention… be present.*'

As she says this I sense all of her and my own absence. Our bodies seem to be frozen, without resonance or emotion, they are not attuned.

I stop and look at Elèna and try to sense whether in the desolate and cold landscape of my body something resounds. I do not seem to find anything.

We look at each other in silence.

The seconds pass. They have no weight, they do not count, they do not unfold.

All of a sudden something in her eyes seems to flash, and a hint of tenderness is sparked in me.

G. '*Something happened with your eyes…*' I feel my voice soften almost imperceptibly and I am somewhat surprised at this, albeit slight, affective resonance in me.

E. '*I don't know…*'

Elèna does not seem very interested in what I said.

G. '*Now your eyes are moist…*'

E. '*I don't know…*'

A few tears begin to stream down Elèna's face. They simply fall, without any expression or change in her breathing.

G. '*Tears are falling down your face…*'

E. '*…ah… yes, perhaps…*' Elèna continues to show no interest in what is happening. My interest instead grows.

G. '*What do you feel?*'

E. *'Um... nothing...'*

As Elèna pronounces this gaunt, yet penetrating word, *nothing*, a small but sharp pain awakens in my chest. Then slowly it spreads and I gradually recognise it as sadness. A still but profoundly deep sadness, like the dark water of a well.

G. *'... Your cry, I feel pain...'*

Someone in the group is touched. My sadness becomes more mobile.

E. *'... I don't understand.'*

G. *'... Your cry, I feel pain...'*

E. *'I haven't cried all year. I don't know why I'm crying now...'*

I feel attuned (together with the group) to a pain that Elèna still cannot feel, but through my feeling she can begin to express it.

G. *'What's happened this year?'*

E. *'I've been constantly on the move, hyperactive I think. Ever since the war made me and my family flee... ever since we lost our home and our belongings... ever since we've been separated and displaced...*

Now, my son, my husband and I no longer have a home to see each other in... we are displaced.'

My pain finds a meaningful horizon. My sadness is no longer immobile, but moves and warms up. It moves me intensely.

E. *'Now I feel sadness...'* says Elèna.

Many in the group are crying.

From an individualistic perspective we could say that Elèna is suffering dissociation and that the therapist should help her to feel her dissociated experiences. As a perspective it is obviously quite legitimate and could underpin therapy.

But let's shift to a field perspective, where the self and the other co-emerge. From this point of view, we can consider the dissociation as an *emergent phenomenon in the therapeutic field which I also co-create*. I would not say that it is Elèna who is dissociated in the session, but rather that we both are experiencing the phenomena of dissociation that we co-create together. My surprise at hearing my voice soften reveals to me just how anaesthetized I also was, and how I, too, contributed to keeping dissociation in the field. My position as therapist then allowed me not to remain imprisoned within our absences and to sense the presence of absence. In this horizon, the focus of therapy is different. I do not need to change Elèna but remain present as absence emerges and I grasp it. This means *letting her be, feeling the pain of the absence, of the effort made to hold onto it, the pain that could not be perceived because of a lack of support*. In this way I open up the way for the intentionality for contact to emerge, which is how our being present is expressed. Elèna does not have to change; in a sense this is a

side-effect of the process. It is the field pregnant with anaesthetized pain seeking a way to be actualized that has to deliver this feeling. My task as therapist is to be aware of this impetus, to let it be between us, to embody it myself and to support its transformation. To enable the field to actualize and transform, first and foremost through me.

The therapist, therefore, modulates his presence to manage to be present in a field characterised, in this case, by a dissociative anaesthetization. He moves to be present as absence emerges, without wanting to modify it. Once it becomes present, it is no longer absence. Something happens there, and those involved in the situation feel their presence grow and an ephemeral, yet unperishing, beauty flutters by.

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9.

Gilles DELISLE

in collaboration with Line GIRARD

The Self in Object Relations Gestalt Therapy

For over the past 30 years, we have been running a post-university level clinical training center based on our initial training in Gestalt therapy as it was taught in universities throughout Quebec in the 1970s and then as influenced by Gestalt therapists Erving and Myriam Polster. Our own clinical practice, as well as the practice of those participating in our training sessions, led us to deeply question issues related to personality disorders. Certain limits to our Gestalt therapeutic approach became apparent through this reflection.

Although we have never ceased to affirm our Gestalt heritage and even include the word "Gestalt" in the name of our institution, we recognized the need to revise the Gestalt theory by taking into account contemporary clinical realities. This led to a doctoral thesis in psychology called "*A revised version of the Perls, Hefferline and Goodman theory of the Self*" (Delisle, 1996), which was then published in a full length book version called "*Object relations in Gestalt Therapy*" (Delisle, 1998).

This work recognizes how much Gestalt has contributed to psychotherapy as its focal point is the holistic perspective stemming from the field theory. It seems to us that three specific ideas result from this essential contribution.

- The importance of the here and now in the therapeutic relationship as a representation of the client's experiences and as a lever for change
- The importance of the coherence between thought, emotions and action when assessing an individual's mental state

- The importance of experience as the immediate essence of existence

A thorough review of the literature written at the time of the thesis made it become apparent that there were some conceptual limits in the founding text from 1951. Gestalt therapists and others outside of Gestalt circles criticized and commented on inherent theoretical flaws which kept Gestalt therapy from fully functioning in the treatment of severe personality disorders. These flaws were:

- Neglecting the specificity of interpersonal and intersubjective contact, "the other" is just considered as another element in the environment
- Underestimating the importance of unconscious processes in pathology
- Failing to provide a satisfying conceptual framework for understanding the dynamics of transference and countertransference
- Discrediting cognitive processes and viewing them as obstacles to the body's inherent wisdom

Based on these statements, the thesis led to a critical study of ways to make the most of Gestalt therapy's strong points all while palliating its limits. Certain epistemological preliminaries as presented by Mahrer (1989) and Rychlak (1993) were used in order to test the coherence of hypotheses for integration. The outcome, based on this conceptual analysis, was that the Perls-Goodman theory of the Self contained underlying roots of an object relations system. The 1951 theory of Self which is based on a vision of consciousness as unitary proved to have enough common points with Fairbairn's object relations theory (1943; 1951) so that they could be integrated into one coherent theory. This is how the psychotherapy of relationships, otherwise known as Object Relations Gestalt Therapy was born.

Since 1998, this theory has been the cornerstone for the work, clinical practice and teachings being done at CIG (Centre d'Intégration Gestaltiste), as well as for the publications and postgraduate research undertaken by graduates of our institute. The authors of this chapter have introduced some adjustments to their teachings, both from a clinical and theoretical standpoint in order to make the model comprehensible and helpful for the different types of people seeking therapy with ORGT clinicians.

Hence, ORGT is a system of psychotherapy derived from the integration of two schools of thought: Gestalt-therapy, with its experiential approach, and the developmental theories of object relations. This model was created to treat pathological personalities via an experimental process, the guiding force of Gestalt therapy, associated with a psychodynamic understanding of developmental paths as explained through general object relations theory.

This integrative approach has recently been enhanced by the studies led by the Neurogestalt group which was created by members of the Centre d'Intégration Gestaltiste (CIG) in Montréal, and in stride by the French translation and publication by CIG Editions of Allan Schore's book entitled: *Affect Regulation*

and the Repair of the Self (2003; 2008). The work of the Neurogestalt group allowed reviewing ORGT in light of contemporary affective neuroscience. This was also an opportunity to strengthen our practices, especially regarding the links between affect regulation, mentalization and hermeneutics (Hamel, 2012).

These different attempts to tie Gestalt therapy to other schools of thought led us to gradually favor development of the concept of *Personality* over the concept of *Self*. Later on we'll explain why we feel this change is semantically necessary.

Furthermore, due to increasing pressure by the federal healthcare system and insurance companies to guarantee efficiency, Drouin (2008; 2012; 2013) demonstrated how and why ORGT is an evidence based practice.

Now that we have given the historical context, we will move onto the theoretical and clinical foundations of our approach.

Multifactorial developmental framework

Let's first discuss the main points of our framework for understanding personality development. It would be useful to consider the personality as a sort of mental equivalent to our systems of appetite, ingestion, digestion and metabolism. The objects of one's appetite, what the personality swallows, digests and metabolizes in the form of meaning and energy, are events transformed into mental experiences. When the system functions normally, the personality detects, approaches and appropriates potentially nutritious experiences for the psyche. It singles out the nutrients, eliminates the toxic or indigestible elements, transforms them into experiences and metabolizes them as meaning and renewed mental energy. Whereas in the same way that new born babies and infants have to go through different stages to be able to feed themselves without poisoning themselves, an individual must go through different steps to develop their ability to seek out experiences which make them who they will become. They will progressively develop this « mental metabolism ». Just as infants go from being breast or bottle fed to acquiring a rich and varied diet, a person has to first count on others in their human environment in order to be gradually exposed to life's experiences. To compensate for the immaturity of an infant's appetite, digestion, and metabolic system, other people must first select the mental food and help the infant to begin metabolizing. Evolving from the simple to the complex, rising to new and increasingly difficult challenges, this accompaniment is how the nascent Self is able to acquire normal maturity. In the best case scenario, a person's developmental path will have allowed him/her to claim his/her tastes within a wide range of mental comestibles, which will usually provide the most nourishment s/he needs. Hence, susceptibility to «

mental gastritis » or other tribulations in the form of clinical illness will not be particularly present.

The idea here is not to fall into a type of psychological idealism or to believe in a permanent or perfect state of mental health unaffected by the ordeals of real life. Even when one is physically healthy, ingesting something rotten or unsuitable to his/her own metabolism can and even should trigger his/her defence system against the intrusion. In the same vain, someone may be quite solid psychologically speaking and still break down due to personal tragedies involving grieving or betrayal. A healthy personality is defined as the ability to optimally metabolize experiences, to mobilize the mental defence system when under attack, and to then restore oneself.

The psychodynamic heritage of development theories is quite rich. Some of these theories, like Margaret Mahler's, have been developed through direct observation of mother-infant interaction. Others are based on the retrospective and introspective narratives of clients in analysis, as is the case for Freudian theory and many others as well. Then there are some like those handed down by Mary Ainsworth and Mary Main, which stem from vast cross-cultural research on the relative security of the attachment bond. Each of these models for understanding human development through attachment to others - which we will now call object relations – has been based on a type of focal point in a given era, in a particular context. In other words, each of these models stems from a particular dynamic field and no single theory can claim to be all-inclusive. For the Viennese neurologist at the end of the 19th century, the idea that psychosexual development culminated in the oedipal situation established the framework for something claiming to be both universal and eternal. However, for the German speaking psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut, who immigrated to the United States just before World War II, and who reached his intellectual peak in America's prosperous, albeit individualistic and complacent 1970's, studying the trials and tribulations of narcissism was the guiding line.

Today it seems that studies on attachment take up center stage. Initially created by John Bowlby, the attachment theory stemmed from specifically observing the process by which security develops in a bond. Current studies on attachment are so widespread that they are more or less synonymous with the study of psychological development, generally speaking. Is this a trend? A sign of the times? A question of context? Perhaps a bit of all of these, the drawback being that other equally important developmental issues for the personality to reach full maturity are left in the dark.

Considering the current enthusiasm for attachment issues, does that mean that development of self-esteem, sexual maturity, and acquiring a sense of ethics would be better off displayed in a museum for ancient relics? Or maybe it's that these developmental issues simply result from the type of attachment which

determines them. For example, does the resolution of the Oedipus complex and healthy narcissism simply stem from secure attachment bonds?

The theoretical and clinical framework of ORGT is based on a fundamental theory: there is an increasing complexity of developmental tasks within the organism/environment field. The physical/mental parallel which I mentioned earlier posits that beyond attachment issues, no matter how fundamental they are, other challenges arise which secure attachment alone is not able to resolve. On the other hand, how can we position ourselves regarding the multitude of alternative theories on the same subject? Should the development of self-esteem be understood through Kohut, Kernberg, Miller or Masterson's viewpoint? And what importance do we give to temperament, constitution and genetic potential?

Within the framework of ORGT, these very real questions - whose consequences prove to be crucial for clinical practice- lead us to think of normal and pathological development as a complex reality in constant deployment at the heart of a dynamic multifactorial field. In order to make connections among these diverse realities, let's put them in the following interactive model.

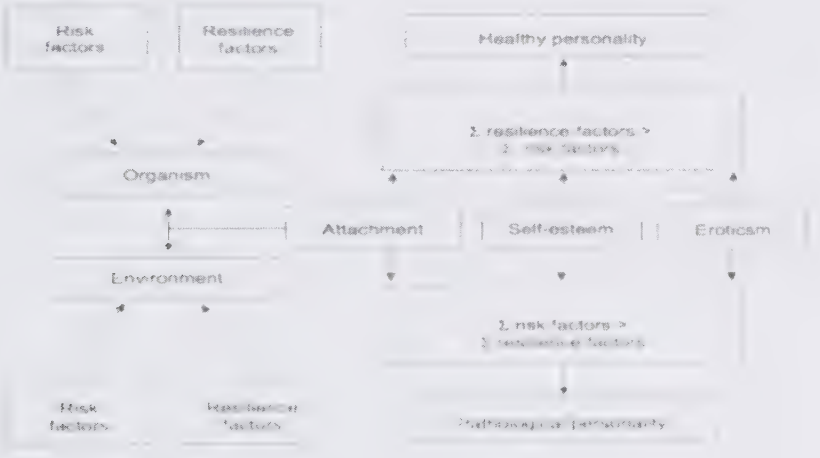

Figure 1.1. Multifactorial concept of development.

The development of an individual is thus considered as a field phenomenon in Lewinian terms. This development is subject to a multitude of forces which join together or oppose each other, creating a path as unique as the person who may be considered as its outcome. This developmental field is the initial meeting ground for a psychophysiological organism, precursor of the evolving person, and in broader terms, the environment.

Of course the environment which we are referring to is human, but it is also

material, economic, political, social and cultural. Being born in Montreal in the 1970's would put us in a material, political, social and cultural context very different from the one which existed in Paris in the 1950's or Beruit in 1975!

The psychophysiological organism is fuelled by a personal genetic program and a phylogenetic engram connected to being a member of the human species. Whatever the initial thrust may be, this organism must evolve in a multiform and multidimensional environment as soon as it appears in its intrauterine world. The development of the person is the result of the interaction between the organism and the environment. Nevertheless, both extremities of this field bear forces called driving forces and blocking forces, in terms pertaining to Lewin's field theory because they support or hinder development. We call the forces which block movement: « Risk factors for development » and the driving forces: « Resiliency factors », as presented by Boris Cyrulnik. Hence a matrix of interactions emerges among four sets of forces acting in the developmental field.

The environment itself also has a certain configuration with its own risk and resiliency factors: the physical and mental health of one's parents, the socioeconomic situation, educational level, and possible sociopolitical unrest, etc. The nascent Self, the embryo of the individual's future personality, develops its mental metabolism by interiorizing its environment first through its parents or caretakers, and then through contact with the environment in a broader sense, where the parents become less and less involved. Also bearing a phylogenetic engram, the little human is equipped with the means to learn how to move, to grasp and handle objects, to walk and to speak. If his/her genetic potential is comprised of a greater proportion of resiliency factors than risk factors, s/he will have a better chance of fulfilling his/her program. The same holds true as well for the environment. The little human being will be accomplished if there are more resiliency factors than risk factors in his/her environment.

But what needs to be accomplished? It is seemingly a huge task! First of all, accomplishment means becoming a person. At best, it means becoming a person who is equipped to live his/her life by drawing out and absorbing the vital substances within an experience and eliminating the toxic elements of the same experience. As said earlier on, there are many ways to develop different resources and skills enabling an individual to have the health and mental strength required to achieve his/her vital potential. Within the framework of ORGT, all of the necessary tasks towards accomplishing oneself are structured around three major developmental issues: attachment, self-esteem and eros-ethos. Structured as such, a large heritage of knowledge can be grouped together. This information is collected from observations throughout childhood and infancy, adult narratives in psychotherapy, empirical research and from insightful theorization. Over the past few years, this body of knowledge has been enriched by data from contemporary neuroscience. Beyond vocabulary divergence or

nuance, organizing the heritage of knowledge on development, structured via three major developmental issues, allows us in our clinical practice to fully take advantage of the underlying theoretical complementarity which is often difficult to grasp because the theories tend to be presented as rivalrous.

And then we may extend this model to diagnosis, based on the principle that the inability to complete a given developmental issue results from the configuration of the developmental field which can be expressed by this equation:

$$\Sigma \textit{ risk factors} > \Sigma \textit{ resiliency factors} = \textit{pathological personality}$$

In other words, the pathological personality can be understood as the result of a developmental path where one or more of the developmental issues were unable to be achieved because the sum of the risk factors in the organism/environment field was greater than the sum of the resiliency factors. Just as is the case for most clinicians, this equation takes everyday observation into account. We receive people who seem to have grown up in very supportive environments; nevertheless, they suffer as adults from an apparent personality disorder. Inversely, we meet others who have lived in extremely deficient environments and who get on with life quite well.

Boris Cyrulnik provided a decisive contribution to the understanding of these situations that in the past would have been incongruous to developmental theory logic. We now understand that they are due to resiliency factors which, along with the better known risk factors, play a fundamental part in the singularity of each individual's developmental path. If the developmental framework can be elaborated as such, and if we accept that pathology stems from a preponderance of organic and environmental risk factors, we can more easily understand how a healthy adult can live through the highs and lows of their existence without "secreting" any serious psychological troubles.

Let's continue to observe how this model is further applied to diagnostics. The ORGT clinician who needs to make a thorough evaluation after the initial client interview will use reference points which help to make sense out of the particular clinical situation at hand. Beyond the first impressions and diagnosis indicating perhaps one personality pathology or another in DSM[1] and PDM[2] terms, the clinician might detect some coherence in the patient's elaboration of their identity. Hence, s/he will of course perceive that the picture being painted is a narcissistic, borderline or dependent problem which truly makes the individual suffer. However, s/he will *also* understand that this *problem* is actually a *solution* to another problem stemming from either arrested development or

1. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual.
2. Psychodynamic Diagnostic Manual.

a compromise in a relationship depriving the client from elaborating his/her full psychological resources. These resources should have enabled him/her to face the normal ebb and flow of everyday life without negatively affecting his/her cognitive, affective or behavioural balance. In short, a disorder could be understood as being the best possible solution the client found to « encyst » a zone of suffering and try to « make do with it », while at the same time more or less consciously hoping that the day will come when he will be able to « do without » or « do with thought » on the experience. In other words, their developmental arrest causes a repetitive, unavoidable and painful encounter between the organism and environment. The little developing organism is required to attempt superhuman creative adjustment simply in order to survive and grow. His/her way of being, which enables him/her to survive but creates a very bumpy ride along the developmental path, shapes his/her identity and way of relating to the world.

Seeing the person seeking therapy in this way helps the clinician to approach treatment in the most promising way: with empathetic resonance which is not *in spite of* the individual's pathology and their defence mechanisms, but *towards* them.

By considering the faulty developmental path of a pathological personality, the psychotherapist gradually approaches the area(s) where development has remained incomplete. It is a question of trying to make sense of this very unique construction, a paradoxically creative act where the person sculpts an admittedly unstable and deficient personality but which nevertheless has been constructed to insure psychological survival, despite the unfinished nature of their mental metabolism. In this vast exercise of hermeneutics, the therapist keeps in mind the fact that things are what they are to the client because of a preponderance of risk factors in their development. Which ones? And what were the resiliency factors? Were they able to at least allow the person to avoid greater deficiencies or handicaps in their psychological functioning? In short, the developmental framework of ORGT suggests looking at pathogenesis through a complex multifactorial angle. The therapist is prompted to dynamically listen to the singularity of their client's path. This approach is the antithesis of the depersonalizing diagnostic which has always rubbed many Gestaltists the wrong way.

The Personality and its functions

So, what is this appetence system of the mind made of? And what about the mental structures which allow for digestion and healthy metabolism of experiences?

Are the mind and consciousness a unified group or rather, as psychodynamic approaches have thought for over a century, are they a divided house?

From an ORGT standpoint, it is clinically useful to imagine the existence of a mental apparatus functioning like a system where relevant agencies or specific structures take on diverse functions. Contemporary neuroscience also views their object of study- the brain- as this sort of a system integrating diverse functions. The extent of neuroscientific knowledge however does not allow the therapist to abstain from the functions and psychoanalytical agencies. What would we call these agencies or functions on a psychological level? Fortunately, the vocabulary and constructs supporting the clinician's reflection on this subject have been created throughout decades of well-argued clinical observation. Whether it pertains to Freud's two topics, to Kohut's bipolar Self, to self and object representations brought together in Kernbergian affective tones or Fairburn's endopsychic structure, our written heritage is abundant with concepts favouring the organization of thought.

The vocabulary used in ORGT which attempts to approach the complexity of human experience including with its tensions, contradictions and stagnation points, is essentially derived from Perls, Hefferline and Goodman's theory of Self (1951). However, the conceptual signification and clinical impact owe a great deal to the general theory of object relations, and more and more to interpersonal neurobiology. The theoretical and clinical reasons which led to the changes in meaning were explained at great length in *Object Relations in Gestalt Therapy* (Delisle, 1998). Priority was given to epistemological coherence in this book, which nevertheless entailed somewhat of a "lexical" weight and even obscurity regarding certain concepts. In the present text, we attempt to make readability the priority, which required some lexical and conceptual adaptation. We hope this will make the subject more easily understood without watering down its essence. For those interested in broadening their knowledge of ORGT the following books are useful: *Object Relations in Gestalt-therapy* (Delisle, 1998; 2013) and *Personality Pathology: developmental perspectives* (Delisle, 2004/2011).

The Id, the Ego, the MFR

Firstly, let's use the term *personality* to define the set comprised of appetence and mental metabolism which we have been speaking about since the beginning of this chapter. We are fully conscious of the importance of the different texts on the Self as described in Gestalt therapy and in other schools of thought. But the thing is, they are all so different and the boundaries of what they describe are so fuzzy that is very difficult nowadays to use the term "Self" without having to commit oneself to using some exquisite semantical and theoretical nuances which, in fact are not very useful for our clinical practice! Which Self? The one that Kohut describes? Or Jung? Winnicott? Goodman?

Even if the word *personality* is conceptually less selective, it has the merit of immediately evoking something familiar to a general psychotherapist. Moreover, the question of personality pathologies and disorders which are referenced in general mental health classifications is what we are concerned with, and whose meaning can be instantly understood and shared by clinicians with a variety of theoretical orientations. As we are attempting to explain here the basics of the ORGT model in a comprehensive way, we will temporarily use the term *personality* rather than Self to speak about our psychic reality.

Hence, ORGT postulates that the personality is a dynamic process where interaction occurs between an ID, an EGO and a matrix of field representations or MFR, the heir of Perls and Goodman's personality function. If the process of mental metabolism of the personality is understood as a logical cycle, then hunger, appetite and desiring (appetence) would therefore take place before ingestion and digestion. However, in order to discuss them, our starting point will be at the finish line. Let's begin with the MFR and work our way back through the cycle to the beginning where everything is triggered: the Id.

The matrix of field representations

The matrix of field representations (MFR) accumulates traces of the person's experience in the form of representations. Continuing on with the analogy of digestion and metabolism, it could be called the conscious memory of what has been swallowed. The MFR represents the archives of sensory, emotional and episodic experiences which are of a conscious and declarative nature. It is this which allows one to say what a person's experimental field is like. It is activated when the person can say who they are, what they are and what their world - their "inner" world is made of. « I am a sensitive and generous person in a perverse and greedy world » demonstrates activation of the MFR.

This MFR is built slowly, as the neurologic structures that make its existence possible are developed. It is therefore a representation of oneself and a representation of the world, but is nuanced by a certain assessment of this specific « self » and this specific « world » in which the individual is immersed. In order to understand this more or less explicit colouring, we imagine that these representations have a positive side and a negative side, thus rendering a matrix with four boxes as in Figure 1.2.

Figure 1.2 The matrix of field representations.

Positive Self	**Positive World**
Negative Self	**Negative World**

Let's immediately clarify a few semantic issues. What we are naming *world*, is what the field theory would call *environment*, whereas the object relations theory speaks about *object* representations. For our particular purpose here, let's say that the three terms all belong to the same semantic network. Here we are using *representation of the world* because in the therapeutic dialogue it seems to be more accessible to the client's semantic universe: « What is your world made of? » is easier to grasp than: « What is your 'environment' - let alone- what are your 'objects' made of? »

With pathological personalities, this matrix might hardly correspond to the reality that a reasonable and honest third party would observe, because it more strongly reflects the inner world of the client. His/her representations are unstable, unequivocal, rigid, and present a limited range of possibilities. These characteristics may be understood as reflecting an accumulation of poorly metabolized experiences, precisely because they were initially poorly selected, poorly ingested and poorly digested. If we go back to the heuristic metaphor of edibles, these experiences remain « stuck in the pit of the stomach » and they tend to confirm the representations: « I knew it! I'm too sensitive and too generous to live in this perverse and greedy world! »

What remains to be seen is what makes the person repeat the same type of experience, to structurally approach them in the same way. This process, at first sight enigmatic, in which the person goes down the same path time and time again and almost invariably reaches the same dead ends, is what we call *reproduction*. Reproducing what and why? We will understand this point soon. But first, let's see how a person approaches these experiences.

The Ego function

The Ego function assures the relationship between the inner world and the outer world, between self and other. It is the active part of the personality. In personality pathologies, the Ego function sets out to organize experiences which somewhat resemble each other thematically, but which remain unfinished developmentally. It is as if they remain « under construction », in a type of constant tension towards completion, but without the tools to succeed. Over time a sort of furrow seems to be dug. As soon as the person starts to slip, they slide towards the furrow. Presented as such, it may seem as though the process automatically happens in spite of oneself. Reality however is more complex. If we go back to the food metaphor, in this context, the person poorly digests what s/he enjoys eating the most. No matter how the certain dish is prepared, if it's smothered in sauce or if the flavour is masked, it's useless. The part that is indigestible or even

allergenic is still there! S/he just can't do otherwise. However, it is important to remember that formerly, these mechanisms or ways of behaving were useful to the person in dealing with his/her childhood environment. Nonetheless, over time, these ways became repetitive and barely productive. In Gestalt terms, we are referring to conservative adjustments because the way a person feeds him/herself and reacts is not always adjusted to a given situation. When we discuss the Id we will discover what makes the toxic food so appetizing. But for now let's try to understand the different ways to prepare the meal. This is the task of the Ego function: to carry out the exchanges at the contact boundary. ORGT sees the function as having essentially five modes for organizing these exchanges between the person's inner and outer worlds: introjection, projection, deflection, retroflection, and in a slightly different register, confluence.

These different contact regulation modes have essentially the same meaning in ORGT as the one intended by Perls and Goodman. However, we emphasize that they interact like a system. In a healthy situation, they alternate and combine with each other in order to achieve creative adjustment between the self and the environment. In pathology, they alternate and combine to reproduce chronic experiential dead ends. Confluence is a state which consists of not differentiating between inner and outer. Projection is a process in virtue of which the person feels that part of his/her inner world belongs to the outer world. Through introjection, the person manages to have the opposite experience. They swallow an element in the environment hook, line and sinker without having any critical judgement. They don't « masticate » the experience and end up inhabited by a type of « foreign body », which cannot become an assimilated experience. Retroflection is a mental process which occurs when a person keeps the internal from reaching the external. They hold back urges and movements which could affect the outer world and modify a situation. Lastly, deflection consists of setting up a reverse process, or keeping the outer world from reaching the inner world. The person makes sure that s/he will not be affected by something happening in the field which could potentially modify his/her inner state.

For example, when Ms. C. comes in contact with men, she may project that they only have « that » on their mind. She thus introjects every look, every comment and every gesture which could confirm this projection. One the other hand, she deflects everything else that the men might say or do which would indicate an experience far more complex than her projection and the idea that they might have something else on their mind. We may also find that she retroflects the expression of her own complexity. Totally absorbed by her own idea, she injects a sort of microclimate into the relational field, centered on the topic which is captivating her into the relational field. The other person feels more or less clearly that a part of what he is or does is introjected, but that another part is ignored or deflected. Actually, the other person exists in Ms. C's

eyes only if he only has « that » on his mind. More or less in the long term, Ms C. will obtain proof of what she bears inside her: in fact, « they » only think about «that ».

The most critical loss of meaning -which can be clearly observed in pathological personalities- is to be unable to recollect a place where something happened, a place where an experience has existed and to be unable to connect internal and external worlds in a significant way.

These five contact regulation modes of an experience can thus be deployed not only to regulate, but to disregulate as well, in terms of regulating a repetitive, conservative and non-nourishing experience. When a person is psychologically healthy, s/he regulates his/her experience correctly. Let's say s/he eats what s/he needs all while making sure to taste and chew well, and carefully deciding what s/he will ingest and what s/he will leave aside.

The Id

The Id in ORGT is not the same Id as the one described in drive theory psychoanalysis, even if there is a dynamic unconscious functioning in ORGT. Actually, our point of view is that the Id is the function of emergences. They can be physiological, emotional, mnesic, or cognitive. In the cycles of experience, the Id plays the leading role. It sets the personality in movement in everyday experiences. In normal functioning, the emergences are in phase with the present situation in the here and now. Thoughts, feelings, sensations and memories arise and accompany a person in their experience.

In personality pathologies, the Id includes an unconscious structure where unfinished developmental experiences remain. Each of the developmental issues is concerned. ORGT sees these experiences as remaining unfinished because of their simultaneously indispensable and intolerable nature. For example, the parent, who a child had to rely on to consolidate a safe attachment bond or to ensure their survival, was actually a source of insecurity. Or another example could be relationships which were indispensable during the first steps in building self-esteem, but which contained the seeds of narcissistic instability. A last example would be relationships where a healthy tension between desire and the Law should have been built; but instead, there was instability or inconsistency between parent and child. The nascent Self was therefore unable to fully reject or fully take in the experiences during these early relationships, thus unable to metabolize them.

In the ORGT framework, these unfinished experiences during child development are called introjected microfields (IM). We believe that these

unfinished experiences stored in the Id continue to bear the same energy that they initially had and that this energy was never able to be metabolized. The nutrients and toxins that they contain are in some way expecting to be treated. The fact that these experiences remain unfinished in a context where they were both indispensable and intolerable gives them a fundamentally conflictual nature acting as an unconscious springboard for setting up the chronic dead ends significant in personality pathologies.

Hence we perceive the phenomenology of personality pathologies as a process whose largely unconscious energy takes root in unfinished situations connected to one of the major early childhood developmental issues. Because of their unbearable nature, these incomplete experiences-called introjected microfields in ORGT terms - cannot really be recognized at face value. However, the person must seek out their derivatives in their current life, because these experiences are also indispensable. They remain in tension towards completion, a paradoxical but incessant quest in hope of finally obtaining secure attachment, a healthy narcissistic balance, and fertile tension between desire and the Law. These introjected microfields thus infiltrate conscious emergences by passing for something other than what they actually are. Doing so, they contaminate the cycle of experience by injecting unconscious intentionality. The person whose experience is contaminated as such no longer has access to a full emotional, reflective or behavioural spectrum. Certain emergences are encouraged and others unconsciously refused, which leads to reproduction.

The Ego function takes over and disregulates contact between the self and the environment via the five modes which we spoke about earlier. In time, the familiar dead end is reproduced and the matrix of field representations duly takes note of this new confirmation regarding the nature of the person and their relationships with the environment.

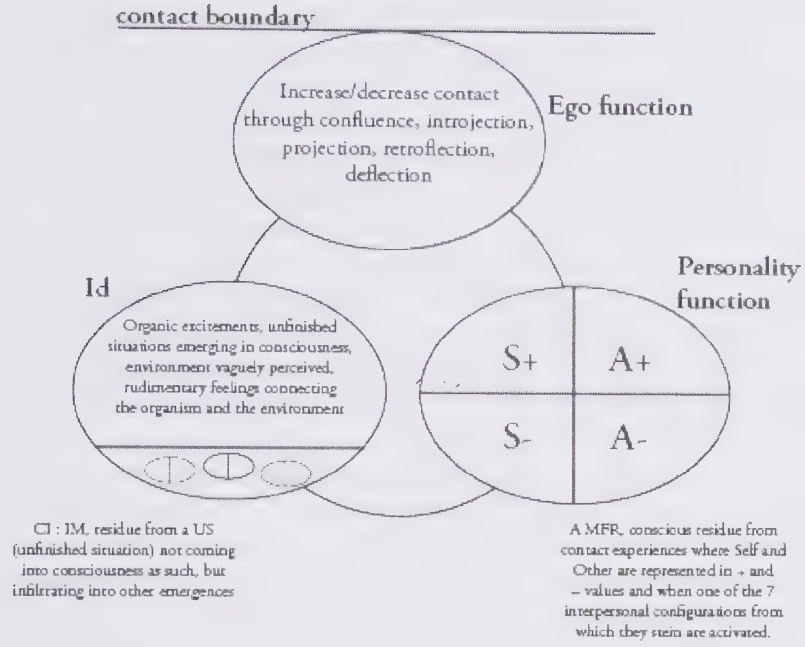
contact boundary
Increase/decrease contact through confluence, introjection, projection, retroflection, deflection
Ego function
Id
Organic excitements, unfinished situations emerging in consciousness, environment vaguely perceived, rudimentary feelings connecting the organism and the environment
Personality function
S+
A+
S-
A-
CI : IM, residue from a US (unfinished situation) not coming into consciousness as such, but infiltrating into other emergences
A MFR, conscious residue from contact experiences where Self and Other are represented in + and – values and when one of the 7 interpersonal configurations from which they stem are activated.

Figure 3: Process: The personality as Self

The therapeutic process of ORGT

Taking into account the aforementioned, the therapeutic process should proceed in such a way that the client's pathological process is deployed. It is then brought into consciousness; its meaning is disclosed and untravelled. In other words, the work is structured according to cycles of reproduction-recognition-repair. The therapist's job therefore is essentially to interact with the client while remaining in a certain frame of consciousness so that they may identify the client's interpersonal and experiential stalemates, associate them to their neuropsychodeveloppemental origins and progressively discover ways to escape from these dead ends.

Hence, we understand that the therapeutic relationship is destined to be complex: how can pathological dynamics be partially deployed all the while bringing meaning of the client's work into consciousness and also remaining attentive to possibilities for escaping from the interpersonal dead ends?

This is why the therapeutic relationship within the ORGT framework combines three interpersonal modes. The transference relationship is the one

through which the interpersonal dead ends and unfinished developmental issues - hence reproductions - play themselves out time and time again. The hermeneutic relationship represents the collaborative dimension of the relationship where therapist and client join together to shed light and understanding on the dead ends and origins of the client's unfinished developmental issues. Lastly, there is the real relationship, representing the relatively intact part of the interpersonal process, which has escaped from the « patho » logical part of the client and which thus would be the essential path taken to enable reparation.

Over the course of the therapeutic process, the therapist tries to detect thematic affinities emerging through the client's various modes of communication. What we mean by thematic affinities are events, incidents, and experiences that the client explicitly or implicitly evokes, and which present similar structural or motivational characteristics. The therapist manages to gradually understand the client's paradoxical logic by first paying attention to these affinities. Via his/her logic, the client tirelessly reproduces the same dead ends by always looking for the same way out. Lo and behold, wanting « that », they guarantee in an unbeknownst manner to only obtain « this ».

The therapeutic process might be perceived as a type of well thought out attempt at problem solving, where the therapist observes and detects problematic situations in the client's life by revealing a meaning and suggesting a way out. Whoever attempts this would be quite naive... because the client's interpersonal models can become apparent only through an embodied interpersonal relationship.

In fact, we believe instead that the two partners in the therapeutic conference have to work on the task together, and this goes well beyond treating the experiences in the client's daily life, their love and professional relationships. We think that there are four experiential fields which must be explored and worked on. They take into account the client's experiences in daily life, their childhood experiences and experiences within the therapeutic relationship as well.

The experiential fields

Field 1 is the immediate here-and-now of the therapeutic relation. It is both a laboratory and a workshop. It operates as a laboratory via the contents at hand and as opposed to fields 3 and 4, field 1 offers another perspective: the therapist's. The therapist, acting as a « reasonable and honest » participant-observer also feels and imagines the impact which the client produces in the interpersonal field. As a laboratory, field 1 enables carrying out « psychopsies ». It also allows for taking samples of the client's intra- and inter-psychic world and to put them

to the test when co-creating meaning. Field 1 is a workshop insofar as it allows for creating restorative experiences: presence, empathetic listening and dialogue, affective regulation, mentalizing dialogue and hermeneutic dialogue.

Field 2 represents the cumulative history of the therapeutic relationship. It is the here-not now, and sometimes creates the necessary ante-chamber for field 1 when clients are opposed to or intimidated by the experimental closeness in this field. For these people, mentioning the session from the week before is easier than concentrating in real time on what is happening in the here and now. Thus it becomes a taming ground for field 1. It can also be seen as a memory laboratory, because it allows for observation of the client's own memory and comparison to the therapist's. What does the client tend to remember or what does s/he try to forget? What is the emotional and descriptive material in the memories that the client constructs in regard to the therapeutic relationship?

Field 3 regroups the significant relationships and experiences in the client's current life. It is elsewhere and now. As for field 4, the elsewhere and ago, it is made up of the significant relationships in the client's developmental past.

The ORGT therapist is positioned in an experiential frame of consciousness where s/he sets out to detect the dead ends displaying thematic affinities in fields 3, 2 and 1. These fields show signs of the early contact dilemmas originating from field 4 and take root either in the essentially preverbal attachment issue, in the more verbal self-esteem issue, or in the more sexually differentiated issue of eros and ethos. These dilemmas, these introjected microfields, have neuronal correlates. As demonstrated by authors in the neurodynamic field, the brain is literally sculpted by these major developmental issues, and it tends to then reproduce the world in its own image. That is why the therapeutic process, revisiting the developmental path, has the continual objective of making the bond secure, regulating affects, building the mentalizing process and finally having access to meaning.

Multimodal opening

No therapist could set off on the adventure of discovering a client's developmental issues equipped only with clinical flair and a good sense of direction. Great explorers and mapmakers have blazed trails to help us reach these murky worlds and to put them into words bearing meaning for the client. From the early days of psychology and psychoanalysis, the founding theorists have asked questions, depending on their own preoccupations, each nourished or limited by the era in which they lived.

The history of theories that seek to understand how we become who we are and how it happens that we are so alike yet unique and irreplaceable, provides for a true intellectual saga. A great legacy of knowledge widely upheld by discoveries in contemporary neuroscience has been left for us. (Zellner, 2006). Hence, the classic authors of object relations literature which ORGists refer to when examining the developmental processes are mentioned 283 time in Schore's work (2003/2008)!

Contemporary psychology is not short of developmental theories. ORGT is based on a conceptual framework- multifactoral development in an organism/ environment field- allowing to take full advantage of the knowledge on mental development inherited from and developed since the origins of psychoanalysis. ORGT is based on immediate experience, recognizing that experience is the container for an individual's history, which is enacted in present experience. ORGT is not bound to any of the usual theories of mental development; it can take the necessary step back in order to appreciate a variety of developmental theories for their intrinsic value, without becoming weighed down by particular schools of thought or institutional affiliations. It would be hard, for instance, to understand narcissistic vulnerability without Kohut's theory or to comprehend the constant need to repair an imaginary wrong done to another without Melanie Klein's contributions.

Facing the conceptual and clinical challenges of personality disorders, object relation gestalt therapy takes the view that pathology is a mechanism for making sense of a developmental deficit, for masking it, and for activating it in an ambivalent effort to untangle it. ORGT invites the clinician to give up trying to establish oversimplified links between specific developmental issues and equally specific personality disorders. Instead of offering reassuring and mistaken evidence, clinician and client work together at making sense of the client's experience. This dialogic presence enables the therapist to join the client at the exact place where s/he is facing his/her dead ends; this being the only place where they can be untangled.

The therapist provides the best conditions for co-constructing the meaning of the experience thanks to his/her open-mindedness about the clients' unique subjective story, as well as diverse complimentary etiologic points of view and clarifications. The therapist and client together will revisit unresolved issues. Through their unique encounter and through what comes up spontaneously in the dialogue, the client will be able to finally hope to feel whole within the vastness of his/her complexity.

Therapeutic process and pathological severity

The preceding paragraphs mention the adjustments needed according to the degree of severity of the pathology and the context of treatment. Neurotic personalities are generally capable of mentalizing, even if their creation of meaning is somewhat narrow. Working with these clients requires calling upon the hermeneutic dialogue process, where the therapist makes contributions of meaning in areas where the client could not clearly recognize the meaning on their own. With high functioning borderline clients, a lack of mentalization can be seen in very emotionally charged situations and the therapist's job is to reinforce affective regulation and encourage mentalization in situations of stress. Finally, for those with a low functioning borderline personality, everything or almost everything needs to be built. The relationship must be made safe by the earliest functions of affective heteroregulation. This type of regulation needs to be maintained until the client can internalize the regulation enough to be able to continue with co-regulation and then self-regulation. The ability to mentalize and then to give meaning to an experience can be a targeted intervention only when the client is capable of affective co-regulation. Regardless of the client's level of functioning and the short-, mid- or long-term objectives, the structure of the therapeutic process remains the same: reproduction-recognition-reparation. All three are applied to tracking and unravelling the dead ends presenting the thematic affinities in the different experimental fields.

Therapeutic competence

By now it should be understood, ORGT calls upon a high level of reflexive, affective and interactive competence by the therapist. With thorough training, the therapist can reap the fruit ORGT has to offer. The development of affective aptitudes is at the heart of this model. In order to recognize a client's interpersonal dead end in an experiential setting, the therapist must be able to allow the reproduction to arise and to feel it. The therapist must also refine and develop his/her range of emotions and question his/her own developmental issues in order to be completely available and aware when experiencing the reproductive relationship in which the client wants to bring him/her. If the therapist wants to find meaning in the client's experience, their reflexive competence must be deployed. To shed light on his/her understanding of what s/he is experiencing with his/her client, the ORGT therapist must therefore rely on his/her knowledge of psychology and neurodynamics, in terms of diagnostics and development as well as technique. Finally, with his/her interactive competence, s/he can judge

which words to use, which pace to follow and the right moment to intervene.

As an indication of its integrative essence, ORGT is coupled with Schore's affective regulation as well as with Fonagy's concept of mentalization. This is undoubtedly why 50% of clinicians trained in this approach in Quebec and worldwide work in health institutions and clinics as members of teams with diverse multidisciplinary theoretical and clinical orientations. They know how to assimilate their colleagues' perspectives, and in return, they allow their coworkers and the whole organization to benefit from their own integrative perspective.

Conclusion

To sum up, ORGT is an integrative therapeutic system which understands personality pathologies as being the result of unfinished situations in terms of development. Within the psyche, these unfinished situations lead to the creation of introjected microfields, which unwittingly contaminate the happenings in a person's daily life. The therapeutic process becomes a tracking system of these reproductions in the form of thematic affinities within the four experiential fields. The process enables these reproductions to rise to consciousness, to have them become untravelled and to complete a cycle which was formerly interrupted. This work requires that the therapist is able to experience and fertilize the intricacies of the therapeutic relationship in its transferential, hermeneutic and real aspects.

Translated from French by Susan MARKEL

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10.

Gordon WHEELER

The Future of the Self

Reflections on Contact, Development, and the "Sub-Systems of the Self" in Paul Goodman

"The self is the system of contacts in the organism/environment field... these contacts are the structured experience of the actual present situation." (p. 434)[1]

"Self is the system of present contacts and the agent of growth." (p. 438)

"It (the self) is not the self of the organism as such, nor is it the passive recipient of the environment; Self may be regarded as at the boundary of the organism...; it (the boundary) contacts the environment, it belongs to both, organism and environment." (p. 429)

"The complex system of contacts necessary for adjustment in the difficult field, we call 'self'" (p. 435)

"Psychology is the study of creative adjustments" (p. 271)

"...these contacts are the structured experience of the actual present situation." (p. 271)

"...contact is the actualization (of) the existing field passing into the next moment,... rich with potential novelty" (p. 333)

"Contacting is... the growing of the organism" (p. 373)

"...we have tried to show the self performing its function of creative adjustment..." (p. 433)

"Creativity is inventing a new solution" (p. 367)

"The chief work of the self (is) gestalt-formation" (p 386)

A method "not of correction but of growth" (p. 272).

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1. These and other page references in this text refer to "PHG," Goodman's Volume II of Gestalt therapy cited in the references list at the end of the chapter

I. Goodman's project and Gestalt self theory

With compressed pronouncements such as these on *self, contact, Gestalt-making, creative adjustment,* and *psychology* itself, in many repetitions and variations on these same themes, Paul Goodman circles around again and again in our classic Gestalt text of reference seeking different ways into his target territory which is the "actual present situation" which he locates in the ever-evanescent "actual" present moment, at the metaphorical "place" he will call "boundary" which is both the locus and the agent of the live joining, or "contact" "belong(ing) to both, organism and environment." This brilliant, sometimes almost fevered use of mostly familiar language in new ways is in the service of the larger project of the book, namely, *redrawing the map of human experience and human nature on new grounds* – and all of it towards a new psychology, much stripped down now of most of its familiar trappings of "self experience" such as memory, reflection, and narration and the like, so as to clear the ground for a new *psychotherapy* based on a revisioned *psychology* and *"anthropology"* of human functionalization.

This larger project is then itself only one exercise in an even greater ambition, running explicitly and implicitly through scores of Goodman's books, essays and other writings in every genre, not just psychology and psychotherapy but also criticism, education, social theory, politics, fiction, drama, poetry, and more. It is nothing less than a *liberation of the human spirit*, newly freed now from the multiple threats of fascism of every stripe, "left" and "right". Moreover, these familiar enemies of our full humanity, as Goodman was very early in seeing, would now also include the "soft fascism" of mass conformist consumerism that was then just starting to metastasize in the West in the aftermath of the World Wars, mutating into the Cold War of permanent nation-state militarism that was to cut across the whole political spectrum, threatening humanity and perhaps life itself with nuclear extinction.

Against this grim, Orwellian scenario, Goodman proposed a number of available human resources. First was his faith in *anarchism* – not chaos but the spontaneous generation of organic human community "from the bottom up". Next came *pan-eroticism* – meaning not the predatory, anti-social Id of Freud but the relational/erotic longings and prosocial tropisms of the enlivened human body/spirit. A further resource would be found in the *creativity of the artist*, living in the full contact state of "middle mode" (transcending self-differentiation and boundary, as in attuned sex, so that the person becomes the artist of his/her life). And finally, unifying all these themes and dimensions of the human spirit comes his largest resource and agenda of all, the *rehabilitation and valorization of desire*, which is ever our best key to growth, authenticity, connection with our fellow beings, and a meaningful, satisfying life (for further discussion of these aims and

resources in the context of Goodman's times, see e.g. Wheeler, 2004).

Goodman felt that the very personal, partly biological quality of *embodied desire* makes that resource in particular an enlivening, subversive force for undermining all imposed social orders, and inherently strengthening as well to a person's own capacity and confidence for thinking for him/herself, trusting impulses and opinions that fly in the face of society's narrow, life-denying norms and programs, and acting counter to conventional wisdom, prevailing rules, and regulations.

In contrast to Freud, Goodman did not see this subversion of stable order as predatory and anti-relational by its nature. The Freudian idea that Id and Civilization (or Super-Ego) as inherent enemies, with only the rationalizing Ego struggling to police an uneasy truce between them, is tackled in Goodman's work as just another of those "false polarities" or apparent dichotomies that often masquerade as the nature of "the human condition" (civilization and its discontent, and the like), when they are actually precipitates not of our nature, but of the artificial and anti-human societies we have somehow allowed to spawn and dominate around us. These four key resources – a*narchism, eroticism, creativity, and desire* – when repositioned and seen anew for their real value in the modern situation, will then serve us in undermining these deadening, normalizing forces. However, the greatest of these is always *desire* – embodied, elemental, synonymous with life itself, and always with us, always available to steer us back to authentic values and connections.

Now in order to recruit *desire* as the key force and concept of this new psychology, and to try to ground all these ambitious goals in a coherent theory and method of psychotherapy, Goodman will begin by making four bold conceptual/definitional moves, both theoretically as well as methodologically. Each of these has been taken, at least in many readings, as foundational to Gestalt therapy. One of them in particular – the adoption of a Gestalt-based understanding of the agentic, synthesizing/interpreting or constructivist self – has moved out from these radical beginnings in Gestalt therapy to become a key pillar, in various elaborations and applications, in the structure of contemporary psychotherapy in general, over half a century later. The others, as it will be argued here, function more as theoretical buttresses or bulwarks, against some possible collapse of the original Gestalt position in the face of vehement, even violent opposition of the reductionist Freudians and post-Freudians, on the one hand, and the even more reductionist Behaviorists in Goodman's time, on the other.

The aim in this discussion will be to pose two questions regarding these three "bulwark" or (as we say in American vernacular) "belts and suspenders" moves, which will be examined immediately below. First of all, are these moves theoretically necessary, for the coherence and utility of Gestalt therapy theory? And second (and more seriously), are they even developmentally

and therapeutically tenable in the light of contemporary attachment theory and neuroscience – and of our contemporary understandings of the radical contextualism and radical constructivism of our "post-modern" age? Ours is an age which I have elsewhere called the "Age of Complexity" (Wheeler, 2008, 2009), and one which I find to be deeply consonant with and well articulated by Gestalt psychology, especially in its Lewin-ian elaboration, and well-approached and utilized by the tools and concepts of Gestalt therapy as well. Do these other three of Goodman's theoretical moves enhance, or take away from Goodman's basic adoption of Gestalt psychology into his theory of self? And if they do take away value and utility from our basic theory and method, then what would our basic Gestalt therapy theory of self be without them?

To organize these reflections, I will begin by sketching out Goodman's four conceptual moves in clearing the ground for his theory of self and contact, together with my best understanding of the reasons for each move, in the light of his work and times. And from there, I will move to considering whether each of the four is really core and essential to Gestalt therapy – possibly superfluous today, in the context of different forces, different times – or actually holding us all back, in the living project of the ongoing evolution of Gestalt theory and practice, of which we are all the beneficiaries, the agents, and the living constituents.

2. Four moves toward a theory of self

Move #1

Goodman's first move, signaled again and again in the passages cited above and others like them, will be a radical *shrinkage of the scope of psychology itself,* as the domain under consideration here to serve as the theory base of his (or any) approach to psychotherapy. Goodman insists that by psychology he refers, as might have been thought, to a realm that covers everything we think of as our ongoing and accumulated "internal" self-experience – our memories and associations, our fantasies and imagination, our values and commitments, our hopes and dreams and intentions, our relationships and attachments and sense of identity, our aspirations, regrets, and on and on with catalogs of that narrative or pictorial kind. Nothing of all this could constitute our starting point in conceiving a foundation of psychology here, a foundation on which we construct the theory and apparatus of psychotherapy.

Psychology, Goodman will allow, has to do only with "Gestalt-making," (or creative adjustment), that very specific point and moment of meeting between "organism" and "environment" necessarily in the here and now – a point or region which may be expressed metaphorically, but not reduced to

the "sensitive skin" This "point" is not a literal place but a transient actuality or at most a very brief process, always repeated and in the healthy case, always in a new way, always "passing into the next moment" which will also be called, again, *creative adjustment*, or just *contact*. This contact is "at the boundary" of organism and environment. But there too, our familiar idea of boundary as a line or region must be set aside. More than just a site of contrast, boundary here is an activity, even an actual agent of this joining-across-a-difference (again, see the above quotes). The outcome or at least the process of this act or agency is "Gestalt-making" the finding or imagining/constructing of coherent wholes which can serve to orient us in our reality – on the way, presumably, to some action in our situation. Again, the Lewin-ian model fits best here.

All those other issues and matters – ongoing relationships, habits, patterns of behavior, social norms and expectations, rules, values, even aspirations and the long-term intentions and commitments that may seem to define or at least delineate our lives – do have a kind of existence too, though not as dynamic constituent parts of *self,* or Gestalt-making, or contact, from which they will be excluded from consideration, and held apart. Thus, just to be clear again on this key starting point, they are not parts of psychology, which is only the "study of creative adjustments"

This is not just academic hair-splitting. Goodman has a strong reason for making this strict distinction. The reason is so that we may have an "*autonomous criterion*" of healthy or less healthy functioning, which is to say, a basis for evaluating the one process which does belong to psychology, which is *Gestalt-making* itself, but purely in its own terms, not in terms of any normative or cultural superstructure which will impose content values on the process itself. Again if we look more deeply here we find the reversion to the paramount issue of *desire*, Goodman's larger, overriding thematic in essentially all his works. Specifically here, in evaluating Gestalt-making (or contact, or creative adjustment) we will be following the client's *own desire* through to fulfillment and fruition (or not), in a series of *stages of contact*, and applying only process/descriptive criteria to it. Gestalt-making is the "life history" of a specific desire, from a need state to awareness (internally, where desires originate) through "orienting" to scanning and finding in the field, and on to "manipulating" – Goodman's two dimensions of the contacting process, on the way, hopefully and in the best cases, to fulfillment through creative adjustment, which is the healthy outcome or perhaps just adjustment, à *la* Freud, which is generally neurotic, or repetitive.

In this way – and this is most important of all – there will be no space in the new system at all for the oppressive norms of Freud (the rigid psychosexual stages, the clinical labels and pseudo-scientific name-calling -- anal retentive, polymorphous perverse, sublimated, sexually "inverted" and the like), or the

mechanical cog-person of Skinner's Behaviorism, suitable for the kind of social-engineering projects Goodman saw in mass societal improvement, which made up so much of Goodman's quarrel with the political Left.

Thus Goodman's seemingly arbitrary or draconian paring down of the whole of psychology to just this single act or moment turns out to be the solution to an urgent challenge, namely how to get the dead hand of Freud and the all-too living hand of conformist social engineering, out of the process of helping people with their suffering, which is psychotherapy. The *cost* of this solution is then the same as the solution itself, i.e. by being quarantined in this way, *contact* (or Gestalt-making, or creative adjustment – or as we shall see, *self*) is then by the same token deracinated, cut-off from its context in attachment, development, relationship, community, culture, even spiritual values and intuitions – or as we can add today, neurologically patterned habits that are also mirrored and encoded in the brain, which is just a more or less fancy way of saying learning, since all learning has some neurological substrate by definition (otherwise, how could it persist, and be called learning?) Whether that solution is no longer necessary, and whether the cost of it is worth the cost of it, are questions which we will take up below, after we consider the other three moves.

Move #2

Now, having strictly delimited "psychology" to just that point and moment of what we might call an individual instance of "contact" or "Gestalt-making", Goodman moves to describe or at least reference what goes on "inside" that moment. This of course is where he will reach for Gestalt psychology, as providing a more adequate "theory of awareness" than the pure associationism offered by Freud (PHG, pp. 382-7). More specifically, the model he is reaching for and building on is not just the initial lab work from the very beginnings of Gestalt research (the perceptual/cognitive issues and challenges, often involving ambiguous stimuli presentations, which are most popularly associated now with the notion of "Gestalt"), but rather the more fully articulated, more dynamic and "experience-near" model of Kurt Lewin. For an example see a sample of Lewin's early work 1918, also 1938, quoted at some length in one of the very rare actual academic-style citations Goodman offers in his entire 300+-page text (PHG p. 323), or see Lewin's more developed perspective in any of his later work, e.g. 1936.

Since Lewin's work is so important, not only as the base of the Gestalt psychology foundation in Gestalt therapy, but also more widely in the world of psychology today, we will take some time here to specify just what Goodman and the Perlses have taken from Gestalt psychology, which has meant so much for the remarkable dynamism, resilience, and longevity of Gestalt therapy in the crowded marketplace of therapeutic ideas.

One way of explaining Lewin's body of work is to say that he was primary in lifting Gestalt out of the static world of lab perceptual research, where subjects mostly sat and were presented with borderline or ambiguous perceptual scenes and other stimuli, and in relocating the model in the active, dynamic, and high-stakes "real world" of *living situations*, imagined or real, with their "real-world" dynamic complexities of shifting opportunities, challenges, and other conditions, known, partially so, or unknown, and real risks consequences. All of this has to be interpreted, evaluated, and used by the subject to *learn something, take an action, avoid a threat or danger, grab an advantage* where possible, and generally deal with "what's here" (as interpreted, or remembered, or guessed subjectively, remember), hopefully on the way to "what's next"

In Lewin's picture, schematically understood here, we enter a "situation" scan for conditions and features known or guessed-at, interpret and evaluate these perceived conditions as favorable/unfavorable/neutral in relation to our own most salient concerns and goals (and beliefs, expectations, and apprehensions) – and then take or avoid the actions that seem to us best to address the integration of all these dynamic factors and considerations. This action (or inaction, or series of actions), may then be after exploration/experimentation/reflection – or else (and probably most commonly) in a single brief and minimally reflective instance of what we might call "extended field perception". A "situation" here may be defined, again in Lewin-ian terms, as some *suite or list of perceived conditions taken to be a coherent set* (whether by being physically present together, or being brought together reflectively, either in prospect or retrospect or both) – where that "set coherence" or condition of belonging relevantly together is determined (again subjectively, interpretively), as are the boundaries of the situation-domain, by its/their perceived relation to my own salient needs at the time.

In other words, all this coping, all this learning, is basically all subjective, all guesswork. Or, as Lewin put it, more elegantly "All perception is essentially an act of problem-solving" likewise, "Every act of perception is also an act of interpretation" (cited in Marrow, 1969). Or (again from Marrow), "the need organizes the field" Thus Lewin brought the revolutionary work of the first generation of Gestaltists, with all its implications of radical subjectivism and uncertainty, into the "real" world of decisions and plans, challenges and issues, relational, social systems and organizations, and the necessarily radical uncertainty or incompleteness of human situations and human affairs. These affairs unfold, of course, not really just in single instances, but in on-going manner, over time (involving as they do, not just the uncertainties of "the environment" in a physical way, but of course the dynamic and only semi-predictable vagaries of *other human beings).*

Thus Lewin made and bequeathed an understanding of Gestalt that was ripe

for the plucking, so to speak, for therapeutic work, since it depicts as it does the ordinary and extraordinary, often creative ways in which we try to live the most satisfying, personally acceptable life we can manage, in relation to our on-going and subjective readings of the worlds we inhabit and move through. It must be remembered again that these worlds are made up not just of the challenges of our physical environment, but of those most complexly variable "environmental conditions" of all, namely our fellow human beings. We are *evolved for relationship,* as Lewin grasped richly (e.g. 1951), and as Goodman likewise intuitively appreciated. In this as in so many things, they were both far ahead of not only the reductionist mainstream in psychology of those times, but also of the evolutionary theory itself in science, which for decades after Lewin and Goodman, was still in the thrall of mid-century High Individualism (see discussion e.g. in Wilson, 2007, also Wheeler, 2011).

To see how directly Lewin leads to Goodman, and how Goodman drew on Lewin, we must consider for example the familiar tool we call the *Gestalt experiment.* In traditional coaching or some forms of counseling, the idea of "experiment" means, basically, trying out or practicing a new skill, generally under instruction and modeling, in the service of adding it to your reliable repertoire for solving problems. In Gestalt therapy, by contrast, an experiment is rather a proposal, either suggested by the therapist, client or another group member, for "trying on" a thought, feeling, statement, or other behavior, not because that is the "best" or "right" answer to some problem according to some expert, but for the purpose of *surfacing the hidden dynamics of* a situation. If I feel anxious or uncomfortable, say, with accepting or giving compliments, or other warm supports, then in Gestalt work I can go ahead, with therapist support, and try out the feared behavior or experience, i.e. enact it, or maybe just imagine enacting it, and see what happens. Rather than presuming to know in advance all the unique and often surprising "inner dynamics" of my feelings and processes, the therapist will likely support me to stay with this "outside the comfort zone" experience, for the specific purpose of learning more, together, about what is exactly that *makes* it so uncomfortable. What is the sequence of anticipated "nexts" which I "know" will unfold if I open myself to this risky sequence? Will I acquire an unbearable debt of obligation, if I accept a compliment? Commit myself rashly to "living up" to always performing that way, and that well? Enter a realm of polite niceties where I do not know what information to trust, thus maybe surfacing an unawares belief that only harsh feedback can be trusted? The possibilities are endless, and endlessly fascinating, far beyond some prescriptive, "expert" pronouncement on the case, which is of course part of what makes Gestalt therapy so endlessly fresh and enlivening, to client and therapist alike. In my case, specifically on the issue of discomfort with receiving compliments, what I discovered through supported experiments was

that my real fear was that I would be perceived wrongly, as I first thought, as really needing and wanting that positive feedback, in other words, a kind of fear of looking "weak" or "needy". The habit of avoidance – brushing off the positive feedback with a self-deprecating joke, or maybe turning all the credit back to the other person – was serving me to avoid an anxious situation. But then staying even longer with that anxiety, I began to contact a deeper level of fear, of some menacing embarrassment or shame, which then emerged was far worse than just being perceived wrongly as longing for affirmation. What if I were perceived *rightly* as needing, craving, thirsting for some kind of personal affirmation? What if my real, inner early damage in this area of mirroring, resonating, *being seen*, were itself to be exposed? What then? This is easy to retell now, long after this first exploration in therapy, but years ago, in my first supported contact with that level of truly agonizing, infantile panic of aloneness and abandonment, un-mirrored and untethered to the point of near non-existence – well, as each of us no doubt knows with some uniquely personal issue of our own, these therapeutic experiences are life-changing. In retrospect, I reflect now, it is no wonder I became a relational psychologist *avant la lettre,* first excited by Gestalt itself, some fifty years ago now, for its potential to supply us with a solid basis for our then-missing articulated theory of relational psychology.

However, stepping back from what is personal, all this is simply Lewin's familiar *action research*, applied directly here to personal growth or therapy. Instead of just presuming to know the inner dynamic structure that is guiding the organization (or the organism, or person) with an unseen hand, the therapist/consultant suggests or poses an experimental intervention, and then sits back, though with a supportive presence (or else the client(s) probably cannot even give the new behavior/experience a real try) to observe and collect the results.

Now I doubt if Goodman (or the Perlses) had ever heard of Lewin's work with "action research" *per se*, which came from the 30s and 40s, after both Lewin and the Perlses had fled in different directions, in those years from Nazi Germany, long after the years when Laura Perls had studied with Gestaltists at University. Lewin's ideas about groups, about social relations, and most of all about the universality of the basic Gestalt model, that of a proactive, constructivist subject, approaching situations as problems to be learned from, managed, or solved, by synthesizing them into coherent pictures or narratives in relation to known or remembered features, and evaluating them in relation to personal needs and goals and personal estimations of what is likely to happen there next, were most certainly "in the air". It is exceptional to see Goodman citing Lewin's work, and of no other Gestaltists or psychologists, for that matter. By 1950, Lewin was well-known through perception/cognition studies, early learning theory, and Lewin's own research in group dynamics. With Lewin's work, the principles of Gestalt theory itself were becoming more commonplace in the wide

marketplace of applied psychology, of which psychotherapy is of course a part.

It must be noted finally that this basic Gestalt model, of an agential self dealing with a fluid, uncertain world without access to fixed or objective "reality" has transcended its original confines in cognitive research, transcended the bounds of the world of therapy, and by now permeated psychology as a whole, as the basic model of the perceiving, coping self that cuts across the full range of theories and methods. Everywhere we look in psychology, and to a large extent, in psychotherapy today, we notice that the essential Gestalt picture of human beings as the relational problem-solvers, and their problem-solving, complexity-managing, uncertainty-based brain, i.e., the basics of Gestalt, have become the foundational assumptions of the revolution in neuroscience and of brain, and mind-modeling in psychology

Move #3

After Goodman appropriated all of Lewin's Gestalt model to explain and justify "contact" or its equivalent term "Gestalt-making", his third move is disarmingly, brilliantly simple. He will simply rename that entire process, the synthesizing contacting process that by then represented the fruits, through Lewin, of two generations of Gestalt theory and research, by re-labeling it, for his purposes, with the simple term *"self"*. Also, it can be done vice versa, if you like, by renaming "self" "contact" or "Gestalt-making" or "creative adjustment" or at times, and perhaps a bit more controversially, the "system of contacts". This begs the question, because if psychology = self = contact at the boundary = gestalt-making – and *only* these things – then how do different particular instances of contact, which after all are really just arbitrarily bounded selections out of an uninterrupted flow of contacting, when taken as a whole become a "system"? What are the principles of their joining, their systemization? What are the relations among the sub-systemic parts, which will dynamically become a system through certain patterns or forces of interaction, because without such dynamic and repeating patterning, how will the instances come to be regarded as a "system" and not just as a bunch of monadic elements, unrelated by any pattern or dynamic? These are some of the questions begged by that unexamined elision here, from self as "Gestalt-making" as an act, which is the "work of the self" – all the way up to the self being the "system of contacts"

And now Goodman will make one more attempt to deal with these theoretical "loose ends" in his fourth and final move here, the delineation of "*the* (emphasis added) chief subsystems of the self". This is the move that we question here, as perhaps the most inconsistent, and more importantly, least necessary move of all.

Move #4

As we know, not "some of" but *the* "chief subsystems of the self" are three in

number in Goodman's work, in yet another echo of Freud's mental topography, i.e. Id, Ego, and Personality (p. 441ff). These are the three parts of the self, or are they the parts of the human being? "It (the self) is not the self of the organism as such" – in other words, "self" does not equal "human being" *Self* here will represent rather only a single part, however essential that part may be. Somehow, *self* does not "contain" all of our humanness somewhere within it, rather, for all its importance it is only an edge or marginal operation – "Self may be regarded as *at the boundary of the organism...*" with added emphasis. Evidently there is much more than just "self" to our humanness – "Every human consideration must be regarded in its biological, psychological, and social dimensions" reads an early pronouncement of Goodman's Volume II, characteristically adding with a possible embedded reference to Jefferson "...regarded as self-evident" (p. 359)

Well and good. *Id* represents the biological dimension, as in Freud, though with the huge difference, already pointed out above, that this "biological" is conceived as containing our biologically-based, i.e., evolved, as I would prefer to say today, prosocial impulses to connect, to love, to warm ourselves and each other together, and of course where appropriate, to have sex together. Though as we know standards of appropriateness vary, and Goodman was far from conforming to conventional standards in these matters then or for that matter now. In view of the hyper-individualistic tendencies that Perls sometimes probably exhibits, and which remain in part as a legacy in the Gestalt world for a time, it bears repeating that Goodman was many decades ahead of his time by including our prosocial urges and longings as fully inherent to our evolved, biological humanness, rather than as belonging to the "secondary process" of Freud's thinking (i.e. purely a strategic concession to the bio-jungle of living, as Freud conceived the work of the Ego, adjusting to, but never being at home with the demands of social reality). Much less does Goodman fit in with the "hell is other people" solipsism of Sartre and the versions of mid-Century existentialism of so many others (see discussion in Wheeler, 2000). To repeat, in all this Goodman was long ahead of the mainstream, not just in psychotherapy but also for that matter in evolutionary theory (for further discussion see e.g. Wheeler, 1991, also 2011).

Ego –in a way quite parallel to Freud – is evidently the "psychological" realm, in the trio of humanness (or at least insofar as that trio lies within self and its sub-systems). *Ego* is here the realm/activity of choosing, deciding, or in Goodman's less conscious, less intention-presuming language, the realm/activity of "identifying with or alienating possibilities in the field" (p. 3...). This again is very much in line with Lewin's picture of the agential self, weighing conditions and evaluating scenarios in a situation field of moveable forces, where field is defined, again, as the terrain of conditions and features subjectively perceived as being relevant to my problem at hand, perhaps in relation to my larger situation).

Now this can begin to sound like Ego Psychology, and indeed, as the Gestalt

teacher Isadore From lectured me repeatedly (repeatedly because he correctly felt that I was resisting this idea, so when he repeated it on a third occasion, I wrote it down at that time) – "Gestalt therapy is a therapy only of the 'ego' Id is a given, that has nothing to do with therapy. Personality is a fiction: that also has nothing to do with therapy. All Gestalt therapy can do – and note I don't even say it's the best therapy, but it is one of the serious therapies – is to focus on ego, which is the 'identifying with and alienating of possibilities.' That is the only thing that we can change, in therapy" (From, personal communication, 1990)

"*Your mistake*" From insisted on another occasion "is to confuse *contact* with *relationship*. Gestalt therapy is a therapy of contact. It has *nothing to do with relationship* (emphasis supplied here, as it was spoken in the original). Relationship is very important in life - but it has nothing to do with therapy. Or at least, it has nothing to do with Gestalt therapy, which is purely the therapy of contact" (From, personal communication, 1991) From famously did not write. He maintained, fascinatingly, that it was one of "two neuroses his therapy did not clear up". And please note that these remarks were far from specific to me only. Many of his friends and followers, who were and are numerous, can quote you very similar passages from memory or from their own notes.

What then becomes of relationship, or for that matter, of all the other dynamics that make up our lives as we know them - things like goals, intentions, values, the demands and support of communities of belonging, our spiritual intuitions or memberships or practices, all of which are not, please remember, part of the domain of psychology? At this point things get a bit less clear. At least in some readings of Goodman, *Personality* then is the domain of pretty much everything else, which is confusing, if you think about it, because Personality is actually just a "chief sub-system of the self". If self is really to be strictly restricted to the operation of Gestalt-making, of necessity in the "now" and located "at the boundary" – and moreover is explicitly "not the self of the organism" as a whole being - then how did a "sub-system" of it ever get to be so compendious? Was not all that social, relational, behavioral, developmental, patterned, cultural, and for that matter perhaps even spiritual material and process going to be located over in the anthropology department from now on, in Goodman's initial laying out of the terrain ahead?

Or are we to understand, perhaps from the reading given by From and others (I never queried him or heard him speak on this point), that relationship itself *does* belong over in anthropology, leaving Personality as only the realm of "social fictions" i.e. the "stories we tell ourselves and others" *about* our relationships and who we are, yet somehow not the *same as* those relationships and that identity, which, let us not forget, seem to be located over in Anthropology? To be more precise, can the relationships which are *not* part of contact (and thus not part of Ego either, which is one of the "sub-systems" of contact, or Gestalt-making,

or self) not really be part of Personality either, given that Personality can house only our *stories* about our relationships, or about ourselves in our relationships, and not the "real things" or relationships themselves? This might certainly include patterns of behavior by which one relationship may differ from that of another, especially seen from the outside in the anthropological way. That aspect at least of relationships certainly would seem to reside clearly in anthropology, still following this mapping.

When I tried to parse out some of these complexities, loose ends, and to my mind contradictions, in this part of the model with the aid of Goodman's longtime friend, literary executor, (unfinished) biographer, and my dear, much-missed friend Taylor Stoehr, he reacted cavalierly, almost dismissively. "What you have to understand" Taylor reassured/ admonished me more than once, "is that Paul had *no interest in being a comprehensive, consistent thinker.* Paul was a *provocateur* – he wanted to provoke, stir things up, let in some light and air in the Freudian world, which was oppressing him and his kind. Paul was *excited* about what Gestalt theory could offer psychotherapy, because it got Freud of his back. Theory to Paul was an experiment, not some rigid thing – he might say something one day and change it the next day. In fact, he would insist on that."

"But the book dragged on" Taylor continued "and I think Paul just wanted to get it finished. He didn't really care that much about the theory of the self, and those sub-parts. It was the basic thing of the autonomous self in action that mattered to him, in Gestalt theory. You can tell that reading it. That's why the ending looks so much like undigested Freud. He was sitting in cafes, trying to finish the book. You've got to understand, those were his big cruising years. *That's* what he cared about. Mind you, he cared a lot about Gestalt therapy, he cared about his groups, passionately. But I never heard him say another word about ego, or personality – id, maybe. What he talked about most was what people really *wanted*. That's what he looked to Gestalt therapy for: he could say what he really wanted, and *nobody could pathologize it.*"

And on another occasion Taylor added, "Of course Paul was a deep Freudian – they were all Freudians, only with these crucial reservations. (Caution here, only the first four sentences of the above extended quotes are strictly verbatim, written down at the time, in 1991. The rest, which I can hear vividly in my ear today in Taylor's voice, is still just a synthesized reconstruction after the fact, no doubt influenced by and drawing on scores of conversations we had over the years, in which Taylor would alternately push me about looking for consistency in "Paul" as he always referred to him, which was not to be found or needed – or else he would revert to another favorite admonishment of his, about how I couldn't "blame all the individualism in Gestalt on Fritz, and give Paul credit for all the relationship stuff" If Goodman was the more relational, according to Taylor, still he and Fritz joined forces on the question of individual autonomy

as a central goal. "Certainly Paul wrote Volume Two" Taylor assured me, "That's Paul's voice in every sentence. But there's also Perls on every page" he would insist.

3. Stepping back from the "sub-systems of self"

While carrying a certain authority, Taylor's opinions on all these matters are now not of course the last word on the issue, nor for that matter were my struggles with this part of the theory just quibbles about inconsistencies. My real issue from the beginning was not about this or that sub-domain of this or that ideational construct, or the niceties of this or that nosology of this or that way of parsing the integrated functioning of human contact processes. Rather, what troubled me from my first encounter with Gestalt theory was this strain of isolating *contact from context* in this way, which seemed to me to violate the whole "experience-near" quality of Gestalt which was such an attractive part of the package, to me and, I think, to many of my Freud- and-Skinner-plagued generation, looking for a psychology and a psychotherapy that would "ring true" to us in terms of our relational, erotic, political, and liberationist inclinations and concerns.

I first encountered Gestalt in the 1960s in graduate school, not in any course, but in weekend groups that some junior faculty member was offering, for free, as I recall, in order to explore his own excitement with the "Gestalt group" form. I was simply electrified by the whole experience – the discovery, in effect, that there were these uncharted seas of passion, energy, as well as tidal waves of grief and joy and many other emotions locked up inside me, and blocking connections between me and other people - things of which I had had only the dimmest awareness, despite all my soul-searching, all those late-night/early-morning dorm conversations, and about a year of traditional therapy for major depression.

Paul Goodman was of course known to me and many of my friends as the author of *Growing Up Absurd*, a book supposedly on delinquent youth, but one which many of my more privileged college cohort felt understood us for almost the first time anywhere in print, and in some ways better than we understood ourselves. We were too young and too mainstream to be "Beats" – and hippies had not been invented yet. And still, we felt ill at ease in the world that was being handed to us "on a silver platter" as we were told again and again by our elders. But what if we didn't want that world? There simply was no such discourse, and no venue or forum on my/our local horizon for such thoughts, or such conversations.

We knew Existentialism of course, by which I mean we knew that Camus assured us we were really existentially free, because we could always kill ourselves

if we felt like it. Somehow that did not seem to help. From Goodman we learned, in terms that "felt *right*" that the problem came from *values* or more specifically, the lack of values, the absence of anything being presented to us that really felt worth living for. I say "we" not because I imagine everyone was having the exact same thoughts, but because I can't separate these threads of my own experience from the endless late-night wine-and-pot-soaked heart-to-heart-to-hearts where these thoughts and feelings were born and took shape. The fevered sessions where we talked endlessly about the books we had read, or vowed to read books we had already talked about, and in the midst of which, Goodman was a touchstone.

Soon of course "the Sixties" would dawn. This is to say that around mid-decade, rather suddenly, in Boston at any rate, I remember coming back to school at the end of summer '65 to find that pot had suddenly come out of the closet and was growing in planter boxes on every dorm balcony. That marked a shift. Then came the Vietnam War, full force, and with it the anti-War movement, the joining of that sweeping tide to the Civil Rights Movement, the emergence of the Women's Movement with its promise of liberating men in its wake, the Gay Rights movement. And somewhere behind all of it was Goodman, who was key for many of us, in locating ourselves outside "the System" as he called it, lighting a spark, and nourishing an early flame.

Now all this memory-lane digression has a point, and here it is – I must have been going to every "Gestalt" group I could get wind of for a couple of years, before anybody told me there was an actual big book of theory, organized by the now-renowned Fritz Perls and one Paul Goodman. With the name "Goodman" being not that uncommon, it was a bit of time after that before it dawned on me that *this* Paul Goodman was the same person as *our* Paul Goodman, the one who had diagnosed us to ourselves as lacking in orienting values, and prescribed organic communities and movements such as those we found everywhere around us now, by the later 60s. But was psychotherapy not part and parcel of "the System", or "bourgeois" as we called it? Was it not "the System" everything we were trying to oppose? I could not wait to get my hands on that book, and try to get to the bottom of all these seeming contradictions to my rather simplistic understandings of life.

I read the book, devoured it really, read parts of it over again, by necessity, ignored the sometimes hectoring tone. Yet, who had more right to hector us, I must have felt, than this man who had stood so strong, and so nearly alone on our landscape, in favor of youth, passion, and organic self-organization in community and relationship? And as I read, I could feel the beginnings of what would become a lifelong way of organizing my perceptions of the world, more than a perspective or a worldview. I could feel Gestalt, in Goodman's voice, becoming the lens through which I could see, focus, and understand the world

around me. And by virtue of having that lens, that power, I could feel "that world" becoming "my world" for the first time really, a world I could see into, find my way around in, find, even, the meeting places between my world's call, and my own capacities for feeling and responding. For all of this, I will always be grateful. And if I have been able to make contributions in that/my/our world, then I do that through, and owe it in part to that voice and that lens.

Until I came towards the end, specifically until the surprise (to me) of the "sub-systems" part of the theory of self we have been talking about here. The stumbling point for me was certainly not the foundational insight that Gestalt therapy is built on, a therapy based at last on how our human process actually works, and integrating our deepest passions and most urgent concerns into the most creative resolutions that the available supports allow in the present inner/outer field. To me, all that was revolutionary, experience-near, and eminently usable. That essential core of the new approach made the kind of obvious sense to me of something you feel you have always known, but known in too lonely a way ever to have put it fully into consciousness. That Gestalt psychology, the Gestalt view of creative, agentic "self-process" in the world, was the foundation of the theory outlook here, was obvious to me from the start, from before the start, perhaps, since by this time I was simultaneously studying Lewin in grad school, working under direct students of Lewin who had been with him "at the creation" by which they meant the opening up of group dynamics as a field of study and practice, through the discovery of the "T groups" or process-groups – the academic movement that lay behind the whole Gestalt and Encounter Group movements, coming out of the MIT Group Dynamics Lab summer sessions in the late 1940s. Thus the arguments about whether there is any real, necessary connection at all between *Gestalt psychology* and *Gestalt therapy* seemed to me then – and especially after Perls specifically abjured "Gestalt" in his Esalen years – as they seem to me now, not just sterile but fundamentally trivializing our rich, solid grounding in research-based theory of mind, which only grows more solidly grounded in neuroscience research now every year. It turns out that the original Gestalt research movement, a century and more ago, was not only brilliant but enduringly revolutionary. In place of treating human experience-as-lived as a useless by-product of some other, hidden forces (as both the early Freudians and the early Behaviorists insisted) these intrepid researchers bucked the mainstream and determined to explore the construction of experience itself. Why would we not want to embrace and celebrate such a heritage?

As I have tried to trace out both here and elsewhere (see e.g. Wheeler & Axelsson, 2015), in its essence Gestalt therapy *is* Lewin's Gestalt field model, applied to the personal growth situation. This is not to say of course that Zen and other awareness practices, such as the personal encounter as described by Buber, the enlivened body presented by Reich and the lively artist's creativity

described by Rank, and above all Freud Freud Freud, did not all leave their marks on Gestalt. Of course they all did, and indelibly so. But the self-theory that proves to be classic Gestalt, as rendered and articulated by Lewin.

Except for one thing. If you have read this far you will not be surprised to hear again what all that was to me. This radical segregation or encapsulation of the "contact moment" or Gestalt-making resolution for "orientation and action in the field" in Goodman's terms, from all its dynamic context of patterns of social, relational, developmental, community/cultural context and belonging, troubled me from the start. Did not the Gestalt perceptual model show us, almost from its very beginnings in 1911, that *figure* depends on and draws from *context*, is *never* free from contextual influences like expectation, priming, and the myriad of other pre-organizational forces which can actually be manipulated in the lab? Why would we move away from that essential, endlessly fertile point? Figure takes its meaning in the end only in from its relationship to context and ground? And did not Lewin teach us and demonstrate that all perception is interpretation, i.e. that the problem-solving act of perceptual integration, which is our basic contact process, is never free of bias, expectation, hopes and fears and values, in one word "ground"?

How could Goodman, of all people, that passionate preacher of *values* that provided the essential ground for passion, worthy action, and a life of meaning and community, possibly be giving us these baroque, and to me needless appendages to his bold, strong self theory, in order to accommodate the realities of life, and contact, and self-process in his own terms? He had just sliced away in the service of some "ideal" moments of deracinated "contact", which not only can never happen, but actually would be meaningless if they did. For all the world, the complex container of *Personality* – which seemed to be trying to hold all the stories in the world except the one just then being told about the radically shrunken scope of operations of "self," and the radically shrunken field for studying self-process, which was the new, denuded Psychology – made me think of the endless, needless epicycles of Ptolemaic astronomy – inventing and executing ever-new pirouettes to dance around the leftover variations of reality-as-experienced, that for which the ideal system of perfect spheres could not account.

Nor did this seem to me, again, like academic nitpicking. If therapy takes place by isolating Gestalt-making, which is the "basic work of the self" from its dynamic relational ground of attachments, commitments and values, then is there not then any plain risk that we will be valorizing and supporting, through our work and in our own personal journeys, the living out of isolated impulses, apart from our most important commitments and values? It is not just isolating contact from context as a tool or exercise, rather like playing scales or deconstructing your tennis spring, in the service of a new, better automation,

but rather the seeming assertion that the "healthy self-process" by *autonomous* i.e. unchallengeable – *criteria* – is by its nature free of contextual trappings, like so much heavy mental furniture, which we do better to walk away from in a great act of uncritical housecleaning, not discriminating between which values, which commitments we *want* to keep as ours, to "identify with", and which to throw away "alienate". Is it not that in fact what all too often happened, in some early distortions of Gestalt work - and always in the name, it seemed of Perls, whether fairly or unfairly? But then is it not that what follows, logically and consistently, from this insistence on cutting off the self/contact process, whether analyzed in "stages" or "cycles" or "modes" from its ground of larger intention and meaning?

In the end, is it not all an invitation for us to trivialize Gestalt therapy itself, and its impact on the world of therapy in general, as a prime leader in the "relational therapy" movement, which is our real birthright and our legacy, back through the past century, and moreover of the Gestalt movement? A or the common popular and oftentimes professional image of the Gestalt movement, after all, is that we belong to a particular moment in time, that "me-me" moment somewhere back in the sixties and seventies when everybody left their marriages and just looked out for themselves and their own gratifications. Even though the age of rampant dominance of "me-first" economics or so-called "market capitalism" – meaning of course markets *rigged* for a dominant few – is clearly upon us now, even more than then. But in all fairness, is this not the image that this one part of our theory – the segregation of healthy process from values – invites and supports?

Growing older, I find more and more as I look around, and ahead or back, and within, that what you "get" in life is not much more or less than the exact sum of your commitments, over the years. Commitments are not necessarily conscious or chosen with any reflection or awareness, of course. They rather emerge as patterns of preference, over time. Indeed, they may not be "your" commitments at all in the sense of being repeated patterns of spontaneous dominance arising organically from something deep in your unique nature. This would be a sad discovery, growing older. Yet we all know it does happen, and to people we know. You may have lived and energized figures of desire arising out of an accruing ground of valuing ambition, or money, or lack of obligation itself, as the dominant value cluster, by which I mean the one which has repeatedly been "identified with" to the exclusion or marginalization of others, which have been "alienated from".

If values are "standing emotions" that show a pattern preference over time, then commitments are "values-in-action" likewise valorized and "chosen" in repeating patterns, across stretches of time. Even if we take Isadore From's reading of Gestalt therapy as "a therapy of the ego" of the identifying/alienating function which has to be integral to every act of contact, every perception,

then still these "yesses" these identifications have to be on the basis of some criteria, some preference lying somewhere on the emotion/value/commitment continuum. Behind the spotlight of every energized *yes,* after all, must always be a thousand dimmed *noes*. This is basic Gestalt, and for that matter it is William James who admonished the early critics of S-R reductionism to *study attention*, and build a theory from there (see discussion in Wheeler & Axelsson, 2015). But where, in our Gestalt theory, are these persistent preferences, which will add up (as it strikes me now, anyway, in my eighth decade) to constituting the life you have, and the one you are living from here on? Are they in In Personality, with its para-Behaviorist air of being a side-effect or by-product of the main (Gestalt-making) event? Are they in Anthropology, the realm of the social, with that whiff of Freud and for that matter, Sartre, placing the social below or at odds with the individual?

To me, these things are "in" the dynamic, accruing, fluidly structured ground. Or better, they *are* the dynamic ground, which is the "other side" or the dynamic whole of the integrating contact process, not a place, but a set of preferential pre-patterns, more or less hard to break depending on whether they are attached to anxiety, shame, and other non-support fears. These patternings are multi-local or multi-domain, being actively pre-potent in our patterns of social relations, in our habitual embodiment, in our belief and narrative structures, and of course in well-established neural firing cluster patterns in the physical brain, which after all is what "habit" means, in neuro-substrate terms. Thus as we engage "self", that is, engage in "Gestalt-making" = contact = creative adjustment, as I mention for one last time here, these patterns offer and are the very essence of the dynamically structured ground, which must be integrated with figures of novelty or expectation, to create Gestalten of "orientation" "manipulation" and learning/meaning.

As to the question of what becomes of Gestalt therapy theory without the apparatus of these "sub-systems" and whether the theory is stronger, weaker, or essentially unchanged by the revision. I'm sure my own answer, at least, is clear by this time. Our theory is clearer, more consistent, and stronger for a change. Truer to its own roots, truer to what I believe is the most creative and impactful Gestalt therapy which is actually "out there" in the field all over the world today, including the permeation and integration of Gestalt into most of the many, many other major therapeutic approaches on the scene today. It is an influence which sophisticated practitioners and theoreticians of these other major approaches will generally readily acknowledge. It is also truer too to both the meta-studies of outcome research in therapy, which consistently show relational attunement as the most impactful variable in most studies, and the fascinating research coming out of neuroscience today, such as the wonderfully-titled, very Gestalt-sounding new field known as Interpersonal Neurobiology

(see e.g. Siegel 2012; also extensive discussion in Wheeler & Axelsson 2015).

To repeat, we live today in the thrill, the bewilderment, the mega-capitalist exploitation and the fundamentalist, violent reaction of the Age of Complexity. As ever, the true vertical divisions among humanity (i.e. the socio-economic upper/lower divide between socio-economic extremes, which are metastasizing everywhere) are actively masked by the invention of horizontal boundaries (nations, regions, creeds) because it serves the interests of both the mega-capitalists and the reactive fundamentalists to mask the one and invent/emphasize the other. Against those forces of world despoliation and world war we have what? Only those forces of humanism more or less as Goodman outlined them. Firstly, we have *spontaneous communitarian impulses* – Goodman's anarchist faith. Secondly, we have the *pan eros* of enlivened embodiment, not just sex per se, but the instinctive embodied, affiliative warmth that can make people see an image of a faraway child scorched with napalm, and put an end to a horrible war. Thirdly, the unquenchable stream of *human creativity* that always means, for us as human beings, that the past, encoded in the genetics of our DNA and activated by the epigenetics of culture, is never the complete and final determinant of the new Gestalten of the present and future. This means, specifically, that the fact that we have never succeeded in identifying peacefully with a larger in-group, without the spur and cognitive reductionism of war, hot or cold, with an enemy out-group, does NOT mean, finally and hopelessly that we never will. Indeed, that whole-humanity, and whole-earth consciousness is the evolutionary cusp we are "hung up on" epigenetically, at the present moment.

Fourthly, and most centrally to Goodman, there is the fact, the saving human blessing, the magic grail, of *embodied human desire*. For Goodman as for us, it is desire that expresses and elaborates itself in all community-making, all eroticism in the wide sense, all creativity, in short, all Gestalt-making. The Goodman-ian self, which is our self-process, rests on and grows out of a ground of desire.

To these I would only add – as I feel sure, from his poetry, that Goodman would agree – that our inherent human ethics and our inherent human spirituality *also* grow directly out of our embodied desire. As Gestaltists we stand in favor of life, which is defined by desire, after all. The work we do as Gestaltists, as clinicians, activists, community organizers, educators, consultants, project/program/organization directors, and as team members and world citizens, adds to the balance of the forces of life/desire, over the forces of repetition, isolation, and the kind of aggressive, defensive individualism that contradicts Gestalt, and is ruining the earth.

Will all this together be enough? Our history of war and ecological destruction as a species suggests that it will not. Our history of cultural evolution springing out of the resources Goodman marshals suggests that it just might. The great gift of Gestalt, to us and the world, is that we have the tools with which to try.

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11.

Jean-Marie ROBINE

Self: artist of contact

I.

More than sixty-five years ago, Perls and Goodman introduced a turning point in psychotherapy with *Gestalt Therapy* (hereafter designated PHG [Perls, Hefferline and Goodman], 1951). With many of their proposals – which have most likely still not yet been sufficiently developed – they anticipated many later developments in the social sciences. This is particularly true for the concept of self, which was displaced, decentered and then relocated and temporalized. At the time, so-called modern psychology – a solipsistic discipline if ever there was one – recognized only an individualized self as the sole "reality", and the psyche was one of its main variations. Based on "the simplest and first reality" – namely that no human function exists without contact with the environment – the authors structured a fundamentally innovative way of thinking and praxis, in direct contact with this natural conception of human nature. This fundamental human activity – which consists in establishing and modulating contact with one's environment; bringing out and constructing adapted, creative figures from the novelty of each situation; deconstructing any completed or obsolete figures – is the limited but essential function they assign to the self.

If the founders attribute to the self the task of activating and synthesizing the functions it is necessary to engage in a creative contact with the environment, it is clear that the self exists only *when* and *where* there is contact: an ephemeral function, a function of varying intensity depending on the difficulty presented by the field. Under this conception, there is no claim that the self existed

beforehand and reveals, manifests or expresses itself in contact; instead, it *is* contact; it is created in and through contact. In a field defined as "an organism and its environment", the self-function designates the internal movements of this field: movements of integration and differentiation, unification and individuation, action and transformation… To grow and develop, the organism must encounter what is new, different, not itself; it makes it into a figure – that is to say, it forms a Gestalt – and in the operation of contact that it thereby carries out, driven by the excitement accompanying this formation of forms, it returns to this continued individuation, this unceasing self/world differentiation. This process is called self. "[Self] is only a small factor in the total organism/environment interaction, but it plays the crucial role of finding and making the meanings that we grow by" (PHG, 1951, Chapter 1, §11).

This relocation of the self and its repositioning as a field phenomenon may seem astonishing due to its prophetic nature, pre-empting the work of many philosophers, sociologists and essayists of the second half of the 20th century. However, the attentive reader of *Gestalt Therapy* will notice certain oscillations between a traditional conception of a self-entity – sometimes called a "self-object" by some later authors – and the innovative design they sketched out, and with it a new paradigm that would be developed in diverse forms – often less radical than the original – by several authors of postmodernity, social constructionism, intersubjective psychoanalysis or other identity theorists.

II.

In my native language (French), the concept of self cannot be translated by any exact equivalent. Some authors choose to translate "self" as "*soi*", thereby reducing it to a more conventional concept. In *Gestalt Therapy,* while "self" refers to the function of the field mentioned above, in the same text it is also used to designate the sedimentation that may take place in the aftermath of creative organism/environment contacts and in this case, "*soi*" may be an appropriate translation. English seems to be one of the rare languages in which "self" can refer to both the process and its result.

Several authors – in particular the British philosopher Stephen E. Toulmin (1977) – have shown that in the English language "self" originally existed only as a suffix (e.g. "myself") or a prefix (e.g. "self-control"), emphasizing its fundamentally reflexive nature, until the relatively recent point when the word found itself isolated, nominalized and therefore theorized as a noun. William James (1890) and later George H. Mead (1934) probably played the biggest role in turning this prefix/suffix into a separate concept. In most other languages, this reflexive process and its result cannot be designated by a single concept. As a

result, it can be difficult for Gestalt therapists from other cultures to appropriate the use of this concept.

In my language, this reflexive character is expressed by two pronouns: "*je*" ("I"), which designates the verbal agent, and "*me*" or "*moi*" ("me" or "myself"), which designates the beneficiary or receiver of the action carried out by "*je*". We call this form the "reflexive voice", as in "*je me promène*" ("I walk" but literally "I walk myself") or "*je me lave les dents*" ("I brush my teeth" but literally "I wash myself the teeth"). (This is the same reflexive form that will be used to express retroflection.) One of the three essential properties that Perls, Hefferline and Goodman attribute to the self is the *middle voice* (which they mistakenly call "the middle mode" since in grammar, "mode" refers to the indicative, the subjunctive, the participle, etc.) in reference to ancient Greek grammar, which has this form of conjugating verbs (and thus actions) without the need for differentiated pronouns (PHG, 1951, Chapter 10, §4). The two other properties they focus on are *spontaneity* and *engagement with its situation*, which we will return to later on.

III.

How can we use a concept that has barely any roots in a given culture? If self, with its two meanings – process and structure - does not correspond to an equivalent definition in another language, how can this term find its place in the clinician's vernacular "toolbox", to borrow an expression from Foucault (1972)?

In fact, in daily practice, drafting session notes, during supervision and in the thoughts of the practitioner in action, the concept of self is hardly present. But Perls and Goodman provided a description of its functions and its dynamics which makes up a set of valuable, operative beacons. In the same way that physicists can describe light sometimes as particles and sometimes as waves, the clinician can address the self sometimes by turning its partial structures (also called functions) into figures and sometimes by tracking its temporal deployment (also called contact sequence or construction/deconstruction of a Gestalt).

Self is thus a unifying concept that brings together the ingredients required to enable the creative adjustment of an organism and its environment. "For the most part the self creates special structures for special purposes [...] The subject-matter of a formal psychology would be the exhaustive classification, description and analysis of the possible structures of the self. (This is the subject-matter of Phenomenology)" (PHG, 1951, Chapter 10, §5).

As such, I believe – and am aware that this is a choice on my part – that the theory proposed by our founding book need not be approached as a

metapsychology but rather as a *theory of practice*, or even *a theory* for *a specific practice*, based on an anthropology, a conception of man in the world. As in philosophy, it is possible to differentiate between *metaphysical* approaches and *phenomenological* approaches, and the psychological movement that Perls and Goodman belonged to proposes to develop based on what is observed at the organism/environment contact boundary, not metapsychological inferences or speculative preconceptions.

I have often had occasion to denounce the pan-explanatory hegemonic temptation to apply certain theoretical systems to a field that is not theirs (Robine, 2004, 2011). On the contrary, I am in favor of placing different frames of reference in dialectical tension with one another, without looking for a truth that, in any event, will always escape us.

IV.

Our cultural tendency urges us to reify the self, place it at the heart of the individual, define its outline and provide it with attributes – some of which are supposedly "true" and others "false". Yet, as we mentioned, "It is a reflexive operation by which the actor is specified, limited and defined. This operation presupposes integration into a field to achieve ongoing differentiation. It is individuation, not the individual. It is Montaigne's 'I do not paint the being; I paint the passage' (1580/1969)" (Robine, 2004/2012). The self is unfolding, in flux, constantly evolving, becoming by connecting, through its contacts with its human and non-human environment.

Our authors study three partial structures of the self (which, they regretted, were often taken for the overall functioning of the self) which "are the major stages of creative adjustment" (PHG, 1951, Chapter 19, §5).

It should be noted that for Perls and Goodman, there can be no question of reducing the self to these three functions alone: they choose to limit their focus to these three because they are essential to organizing the figure/background process; in other words, they are the three functions that act in implementing an adapted, creative contact.

These three partial structures of the self (or functions) are called personality-function, id-function and ego-function, names that condense the ideas they refer to: the self functioning in ego mode, the self functioning in personality mode, etc.

The id-function means "the given background dissolving into its possibilities, including organic excitations and past unfinished situations becoming aware, and the environment vaguely perceived, and the inchoate feelings connecting organism and environment" (ibid.).

The personality-function "is the created figure that the self becomes and assimilates to the organism, uniting it with the results of previous growth" (ibid.).

The ego-function is "the progressive identification with and alienation of the possibilities, the limiting and heightening of the ongoing contact, including motor behavior, aggressing, orientation and manipulation" (ibid.).

V.

Although Gestalt therapy theorists always take the precaution of attaching the term "function" to each of these partial structures so that their definitions are not confused with those used in psychoanalysis, many regret that they still contain psychoanalytical terms – "id" and "ego" in particular.

"Id" refers to the function of the self that manifests needs, desires, appetites, impulses... It is the direction of meaning. Given that this moment of the experience is lived in a subverbal mode, the body is its expression – or, to alter Freud's well-known formulation, one could say that the body is the "royal road" to access the id. But the road should not be confused with what it leads to... It is more *awareness* than *consciousness* that grants us access to the ephemeral contents of the id-function, if indeed it can be addressed independently of other functions.

Although the terms are not fully superimposable – far from it, in fact – I am tempted to address this moment of the experience using the term *intentionality*. Returning to Husserl:

> "Intentionality is an essential peculiarity of the sphere of mental processes taken universally in so far as all mental processes in some manner or other share in it; nevertheless, we cannot say of *each* mental process that it has intentionality [...] Intentionality is what characterizes *consciousness* in the pregnant sense and which, at the same time, justifies designating the whole stream of mental processes as the stream of consciousness and as the unity of *one* consciousness" (Husserl, 1913/1950, p. 283).

Transferring such an important, widely commented concept from the philosophical sphere to the psychological sphere is, admittedly, risky business (Robine, 2004). I attribute the characteristic of the *implicit* to intentionality, and will reserve the *explicit* for [deliberate] intention. I thereby establish the same difference and the same relationship between intentionality and intention as the one that may exist between creativity and creation. Creativity – potential and direction of meaning – can only be exercised or perceived through a

creation, which is a reduction of the possible forms in which creativity could manifest itself.

History has taught us that the dissemination of the concept of "ego" in the psychological sciences seems attributable to the English translator of Freud, who saw fit to translate Freud's *"Ich"* as *"Ego"*, and this Ego was adopted by the francophone tradition, which translated it as "*Moi*". And that is how, if we think back to the distinction mentioned earlier between the "I" and the "me", the "me" would become the agent, instead of being the beneficiary or result of the action! It would therefore be wise, given the very definition of the "ego-function" provided by our founders and when it occurs in the experience, to restore its name to "*I*" or "*I-function*". It is indeed the function of the self, which is environmental, which is responsible for selection and rejection, and the construction of the figure, i.e. the ongoing contact.

And the attribution of the *Ego* could fall on the personality-function, since this "me" is made up of sedimentations of successive experiences. But I do not deny the tradition that uses "personality" to refer to the set of characteristics of a particular individual, although PHG emphasize the difference between "who I am" and "who I think I am." And it is more this second aspect that defines the personality-function.

In his unpublished teachings, Isadore From stated that the ego-function was the bridge between the personality-functions or between the id and the environment; in other words, this ego-function could not get involved without support from one of the other two functions.

VI.

A simplistic reading of these functions could lead some Gestalt therapists to try to make their patients' words fit within the narrow framework of these partial structures as one might do with independent entities. Thus, if the patient described herself or stated one of her characteristics ("I am someone who…"), the therapist would diagnose a manifestation of the personality-function; a patient who stated his desire or need — or even ahead of that possibility, who expressed a bodily feeling — would be interpreted as driven by the id function; a patient who made a choice would be seen as manifesting the exercise of her ego-function. This conception of a subject as made up of "little boxes" that are more or less sealed is far from meeting with my approval, since all experience mobilizes the entire self, and the therapist's focus on one partial function or another is related to the work that takes place from one moment to the next.

An expression that might "traditionally" be read as an expression of the personality-function could thus be used in work to build up access to the id-function, if such an orientation seems relevant. An amusing example can be imagined based on something Perls often said at his Esalen seminars: "I believe that I am the best therapist for any type of neurosis in the States, maybe in the world" (1969a; 1969b). If this statement were taken at face value, it might reveal the traits of a personality that is, at the very least, not characterized by modesty. But the choice of organization of how the message is heard by the recipient can lead that listener down other paths: "What is this Perls trying to accomplish by having me hear this representation he has of himself? What does he want from me?" And in this way a focus placed on the id-function of the self can come to the foreground.

The concepts put forth to approach the deployment of the self can thus be used more dynamically and less structurally to serve as a gateway to the experience lived from moment to moment.

In addition, although the various functions of the self described by our authors can be addressed as partial structures, they can also be regarded as specific moments of the experience, as momentary dominant features in the course of building a Gestalt.

VII.

The second way of looking at the self involves its temporal dimension. This modality is described by the founders as a *sequence*: a succession or sequence of operations that may lead to a phenomenological observation. In its so-called subsequent developments, this sequence was renamed "cycle" by certain schools of thought, which to me seems to be a completely inappropriate term. A cycle describes a recurring – and thus predictable – phenomenon such as the cycle of the seasons, the menstrual cycle, the cycle of the tides and the lunar cycle. This is – let us hope – far from being the case of the human experience and the creation of figure/background relations which lead to novelty and therefore the unknown.

This sequence is also described in terms of "process". In this regard, it seems important to consider the difference between "process" and "sequence". A process is defined by two basic characteristics: first of all, it is an ordered sequence that leads to a result. We can thus describe the series of operations that allows us, for example, to cook an egg or to complete an apprenticeship; the objective is specific and clearly defined. The second characteristic of a process is that the phenomena that follow one another in time present a coherent unity with the objective. Boiling water is part of the egg-cooking process, as is immersing the

eggs in the water. But if during this operation I answer the phone or set the table, these actions are not part of the egg cooking process, yet they are actually part of the sequence – that is to say, the series of my actions. Thus, during a therapy session – one of whose lines of work may concern "interruptions of contact" – is it more operative to focus on the process or on the sequence? In fact, we can only really know a process once it has been completed, since it then becomes possible to show the series of operations that contributed to its completion, without retaining parasitic or irrelevant parallel actions. However, these so-called parasitic actions that occur during contact and the construction of a Gestalt will not be absent from subsequent dysfunctions or even their fixation in a psychopathological form.

During a group therapy session, Pierre discusses his difficulty in accessing bodily sensations and the fact that, on the rare occasions when they do reach his consciousness, he cannot make sense of them and does not know what to do with them.

Work begins, focused on the consciousness of his bodily experience and, supported by the safety of the group setting and his trust in our contact, he manages to emerge and name sensations, not without some anxiety. Explicitly, the next moment appears to be a search for meaning and direction in contacting rooted in these sensations.

He pauses, then reports that something is happening in his mouth and that before continuing he would like to eat a piece of candy. He looks for the basket where the group organizer had set out a selection of sweets.

I draw his attention to this "need" to swallow something, just when the possibility of an action of expression was opening up – that is to say, the opposite movement, directed toward the world, not turned back toward the organism.

He asks for my support to experience this other possibility, suddenly aware of his propensity to interrupt at this specific point in the process by "swallowing" his feelings.

I suggest that he use his breathing – especially exhaling – to experience how it feels when he turns "something" rooted in his bodily sensations toward the world. Then, while remaining at a distance, I invite him to direct his breath in my direction, as if he wanted to hit me in the face with his exhalation. After a few breaths, emotion accompanies his breathing; the feeling of being welcomed opens access to the other, to the world, and the sequence can continue in the novelty of this mode of contact.

This illustration shows how a mini-event – which appears to be a parasite to the process – takes its place in the sequence. It also reveals how the "status" that the therapist assigns to the event can be decisive. The current concept of "interruption of contact" – which should obviously be understood to mean "interrupting the figure of contact being constructed" and not "interrupting the contact between you and me" – therefore strikes me as highly ambiguous. I am more inclined to entertain the hypothesis that contact (the construction of the figure) continues despite appearances by taking on a form whose "logic" may escape me but which should be considered connected to the experience. The interruption may thus be caused by the therapist following the *process* rather than the *sequence*.

VIII.

This sequence has been described multiple times throughout the history of Gestalt therapy. In my view, the description provided by Perls and Goodman is still fully relevant insofar as it addresses the sequence in terms of figure background relationships rather than in behavioral terms as was generally the case later on. They highlight how each phase is characterized by a specific figure, supported by a background that is no less specific, and thus creates a kind of dance between figures that advance into the foreground and then return to the background, enriching it and enabling the establishment of a brighter, clearer, sharper figure. What is offered is thus a true aesthetics of the self: a description of the formation of forms *(Gestaltung)*.

It does not seem necessary, within the framework and limits of this chapter, to detail how the sequence of the deployment of the self unfolds, since this is extensively discussed in Chapters XII and XIII of PHG (PHG, 1951). Let us only briefly review its theoretical choreography:

Initially there is creative undifferentiation, that moment where nothing constitutes a figure and where the permanence of the background is ensured by the body. (Here I am of course speaking of the "phenomenal body" as theorized by Merleau-Ponty in his first book (1945) and which he later came to call "flesh" (1964).) Then the situation opens up to the emergence of sensations outside of this undifferentiated background. The figure, driven by the background, is then constituted by the direction of meaning (desire, need, appetite, urge, etc.). This is the forecontact phase. The figure joins the background, melting into it. The background is no longer just "body" but becomes what might be called a "desiring body", and the "possible objects" to contact are built into figures (others, objects, contacts, meanings, experiences, environment, etc.). The "I" is at work making choices and rejections. The choices – and then THE choice

refine the figure. Rejected hypotheses move into the background, thereby feeding it. This is the contacting phase. Next, what made up the direction of meaning can blend momentarily into the chosen "object". This is the final contact phase, a term which recalls that this contact, this construction of a figure was aimed at reaching this *final purpose.* But it is not the *end* of the sequence, since the time has now come for withdrawal and the assimilation of the experience. What has been experienced with "the chosen object" joins the background and the experience enriches the self's personality-function. The figure gradually fades away until it disappears as such. This is the post-contact phase.

This sequence, which I have oversimplified here, can be criticized due to its relatively solipsistic description. It gives rise to various subsequent contributions to fit into the field paradigm, which places it in a perspective of co-creation. We will return to it when we discuss this paradigm.

IX.

Approached in its temporal dimension, the self appears to be an ever-changing function: operating at very low intensity when the organism is at rest and only slightly mobilized when the situation is contacted through routines and systems of habit, the more difficult the field and the more it requires both adjustment and creativity, the more the self is fully engaged.

It is often described using the metaphor of the sea or the river ("We never bathe twice in the same river," wrote Heraclitus in the sixth century B.C.E.). Although it is mobilized in various ways and constantly created by the novelty of situations, the self is not multiple (in the sense of having multiple selves). The sea can be calm, choppy, stormy, warm or cold, with or without waves, turquoise or grey, but it will always be "the sea" because the word "sea" designates what unites all of these changing characteristics, whatever they may be. I see "self" as the unifying principle of the forms of experience.

X.

I would like to briefly mention what our founders called "interruptions of contact", which they only discussed in the last chapters of the founding book (PHG, 1951, Chapters 14 & 15). It should however be noted that these interruptions were the focus of most of the practical section written by Hefferline and Perls (PHG, 1951).

These modalities – confluence, introjection, projection, retroflection, egotism, repression, sublimation and reaction formation – have been the subject of much controversy in the community, concerning their names as much as

their status in the theoretical apparatus. The *Gestalt Journal* amply documented this debate over the course of the 1990s. Incidentally, it should be noted that repression, sublimation and reaction formation seem to have fallen out of fashion – or been rejected? – by the majority of Gestalt clinicians, without having been the subject of a critical study.

Some currents of Gestalt therapy place these modalities at the center of therapeutic work, which may lead the therapist to engage in a real hunt for what they see as major disruptions. Moreover, for a long time, in a process initiated by Perls and amplified and expanded by the Polsters (Polster, E. & M. 1973/1983), these modalities were considered "resistances" before the theoretical error was recognized.

The term "interruption of contact" manifests a certain ambiguity related to the implicit definition that each of us may have of contact. A human being is always in contact with something or someone, be it with the air he breathes or the ground on which he stands. Contact can move – even very rapidly – from one figure to another (in a sort of noematic change, to twist Husserl's term) just as it can change modalities, switching from visual contact to emotional contact, for example (which would be a noetic variation). This means that it is not "the contact" that is interrupted, but rather the object of the contact or the modality that is replaced by another. As I mentioned following the illustration quoted above, I can also hypothesize that the self engaged in a situation remains involved in a theme for longer than it may seem...

Since these modalities are described in two chapters entitled "Loss of ego-functions", Isadore From (1981sq.) gave them this name in the plural. His reading of this chapter led him to understand that when a subject presented disturbances of the id-function or the personality-function, the ego-function was no longer able to make healthy identifications and alienations, and was therefore momentarily lost. Then, in this absence of functioning in ego-mode, along came one of these modalities as a substitute (projection, introjection, etc.), an expression of dysfunction and therefore of pathology.

Another reading can also be made of the rhetoric of this chapter. What happens *when* there is a loss of the ego-function? When this is the case, what happens to the modalities of contact called introjection, projection, etc.? How do they operate *differently*? It is therefore no longer they themselves that are dysfunctional, but instead the experience in the absence of the self's ego-mode. Each of us could cite many examples of situations in which it felt "healthy" to retroflect or introject!

Another difficulty associated with these concepts is related to the confusion that can occur between these modalities – specific moments of the ongoing contact – and making them chronic. Introjection or retroflection designate operating modes during the course of a contact sequence, so *introject* or *retroflect*,

for example, designate their fixation. This confusion, which is unfortunately quite common, leads some to speak of an *introjection* which, for example, is supposedly rooted in childhood experiences, whereas they are perhaps in the presence of "old" *introject* – the fixation of content and making it chronic – and certainly not an *introjecting* person. Psychopathology should be thought of in terms of calling on fixed forms rather than implementing a creative adjustment.

To give a categorical name to these modalities, in 1997 I proposed the term "*flexions*" found in the French translation of Binswanger's *Dream and Existence* (1930). This term, borrowed from linguistics, describes the way words (verbs or nouns) are conjugated or declined. It therefore has no pejorative or dysfunctional connotation: it only refers to derivations, variations related to the context. It seems to me that this concept lets us address these contact boundary phenomena as *variations* rather than symptoms. It helps us avoid focusing on these phenomena, unfolding instead them as gateways to the experience.

XI.

In the preceding pages – aside from certain reservations, critiques or personal formulations – I tried to stay as close as possible to the original proposals of our founders. The occasionally solipsistic or intrapsychic dimension of certain statements will probably not have escaped the eye of an attentive reader.

In recent decades, a turning point occurred among a number of theorists and practitioners faced with the observation that although the field perspective was still always mentioned among the founding principles of Gestalt therapy, for a long time this field paradigm was far from being integrated into psychotherapeutic practice, which often remained individualistic. The field principle appeared to be more of a slogan than a reality, and our concepts needed to be revisited to allow a greater coherence to emerge.

When we launch this type of paradigm shift, it may therefore be appropriate to look at whether the conception of the self requires a few inflections, or even a redefinition.

The field that Perls and Goodman discuss is not a "thing": they call it the "organism/environment field". That means that every field is a field "of". There is always an organizing principle of the field: the eye's field of vision; a conscious being's field of consciousness; the field of psychology, with psychology taken to be the organizer of a field of knowledge; etc. (Robine, 2008).

Frank Staemmler (2006) made a major contribution to clarifying this concept as discussed throughout the various sources and by all the different contributors, and also highlighted the inconsistencies and contradictions of successive authors' implicit or explicit definitions. Some would approach a

conception of the field as an entity or a semi-entity, others as an experience – in the phenomenological sense – which is both continuous and transient. As with any attempt at theorization, there are choices to be made. For my part, I consider the field as an experience of interrelatedness between an organism and its environment, and prefer to try to use other concepts to designate other specific regards: context, situation, realm, milieu, background, environment, system, etc. What is certain is that none of us is immune to shifts in the use of the concept!

> "When referring to contact and other field phenomena, Perls and Goodman periodically introduced the distinction between 'in the field' and 'of the field'. Placing the subject, the body, the contact, etc. as events *of* the field and not *in* the field clarifies the matter by opposing the two major uses of the concept of field: one that results in reification and the other that maintains the field in flux" (Robine, 2004).

According to this conception, "field" is a paradigm that fundamentally defines a posture, a focus on how each of us can be created by our environment at the same time as we are creators of our environment. In one of his writings – I do not know which – Peter Philippson evoked the famous Escher drawing *Drawing Hands* which shows a hand drawing a hand, which itself is drawing the hand that is drawing it... A great metaphor!

In the context of psychotherapy, this means taking into account the process-related fact that the therapist is co-created by the encounter with her patient, just as the patient is co-created by the encounter with his therapist. What is felt by each person involved, the experience that unfolds, spoken words, sensory and motor patterns, memories summoned, fantasies, historical parallels, the constructions of meaning... are first of all products *of the situation*.

The starting point of my question on "the situation" is found in a small expression by Perls and Goodman when they are discussing "the id of the situation" (Robine, 2002). This is again not a contextualized id, the id *in* a situation that they are talking about, but "the id *of* the situation". Far from the theory of "internal" drives and forces that animate us, the source of the id is localized in the situation – a joint creation – to then give rise to a specific, differentiated, individuating feeling in each of the actors involved.

I use the term ***situation*** to designate the overall perception/proprioception of elements of the field of all the actors involved: a perception that allows them to structure the context of their encounter, give it meaning and implicitly define the modalities of their interaction. It is a space that is constructed and delimited by each of the actors, who are themselves simultaneously constructed by that space and by the definition they give it.

It is also important not to lose sight of the fact that acting and reacting to the situation means simultaneously acting with one's own memory and one's own emotions, since they are part of each participant's [organism/environment] field.

To articulate the concept of field with that of situation, I would say – perhaps only provisionally! – that the situation is created by the intersection of and interaction between the fields of each of the actors involved. Each participant's immediate and selective perception of the implicit organization of the field of all the actors involved organizes the situation. From the field of the actors involved emerge affordances (Gibson, 1979) and valences (Lewin, 1936, 1951) which combine to form the situation (Robine, 2015).

The idea of a "common field" seems to have spread in recent years, both among Gestalt therapists (e.g. Francesetti, 2015) and certain psychoanalysts, following Baranger's founding article (1961), built upon in particular by Ferro A. *et al.* (2009). To designate what is referred to by the term "common field" – or one of its variants ("bi-personal field", "dynamic field", etc.) – I prefer to use that of the situation to avoid using the same concept to refer to two different approaches, since this "common" field cannot match the descriptions of the organism/environment field as proposed by Perls and Goodman. The idea of "common" could too easily be understood as "shared", or even "similar".

What is important, to quote Merleau-Ponty, is implementing the following conception:

> "In the experience of dialogue, a common ground is constituted between me and another; my thought and his form a single fabric, my words and those of my interlocutor are called forth by the state of discussion and are inserted into a shared operation of which neither of us is the creator. Here there is a being-shared-by-two, and the other person is no longer for me a simple behavior in my transcendental field, nor for that matter am I a simple behavior in his. We are, for each other, collaborators in a perfect reciprocity: our perspectives slip into each other, we coexist through a single world" (1945, trans. Routledge 2012, p. 370).

From this perspective, the constantly renewed novelty of the situation is what organizes the experience, and therapeutic work focuses less on what *was* than on what *will happen*. The therapeutic situation is no longer a simple repetition of history, but instead a potential space-time opening up to transformation. Traditional causalist assumptions are reversed: it is neither the patient's past nor even the therapist's that gives form to the now, but instead the situation co-created in the now that may possibly mobilize engrammatic patterns or projections on the future.

The self can therefore once again be addressed as one of the agents and the provisional outcome of every situation. Engaged in co-creation – which does not exclude conflict – creator and created, "our perspectives slide into one another." The undifferentiated part of the intersubjective opens up to the progressive constitution of subjectivity – and thus the self – which is constantly renewed. This taking form (Gagnon, 1999) is an emerging process of contact with the immediate environment; naturally, one of the essential dimensions consists in situating in the contact with the other, but it is important not to ignore the other components of contact, the one that is established with the non-human environment (Robine, 2010).

> "...Every form has its roots in the movement that traces it: a form is nothing but recorded movement" (Bergson, 1934, p. 279).

XII.

Since the self designates this ability to give form to contacts with the world, in recent years there have been more and more parallels drawn with aesthetics, allowing the discipline to extricate itself from a purely medical model. Already in the founding text, the authors stated that for their definition of the self in a situation of creative adjustment, they made reference to the creative artist and the child at play (PHG 1951, Chapter 2, §8). They draw from Otto Rank's study, *Art and Artist (1932),* which Goodman said "is beyond praise" (PHG, Chapter 11, §6 note) and on child-play. Although they do not reveal the source of that latter reference, I suppose they primarily relied on the study of G.H. Mead who himself had drawn extensively from the study of children's play to support his conception of the self (Mead, 1934).

Laura Perls (1992) liked to recall that the term "Gestalt" belonged to the vocabulary of aesthetics and, in fact, all the characteristics of a Gestalt which are listed in *Gestalt Therapy* fall within this same family.

Following this tradition, multiple studies have appeared promoting the aesthetic reference in the phenomenology of the session and the posture of the psychotherapist as much as in diagnosis, clinical settings and psychopathology (Robine, 1984, 2006a, 2006b; Miller, 2002; Alvim M. 2004; Bloom, 2003, 2005; Spagnuolo Lobb, 2003, 2013; Francesetti, 2013, 2015, etc.)

We discussed the fact that when Perls and Goodman presented the self through its partial structures or functions, they mentioned that *among* the possible functions of the self, they chose three that seemed essential to enabling creative adjustment: the id-, ego- and personality-functions.

Based on contemporary developments in the theory of Gestalt therapy and

my own clinical experience, I attach equal importance to a fourth function: ***the aesthetic function***.

This function could bring together various forces at work in the creation of forms of contact:

- The *aesthesic* function. Aesthetics, in its original definition derived from the Greek word "aesthesis", refers to the science of sensory knowledge; it is sensitivity and sensitive individuals that make it possible to recreate meaning and existence, and generate new forms of subjectivity. What is felt – which is at the heart of the work of Erwin Straus (1970) – could take its place among the sources of experience and be differentiated from the id-function.

- The *aesthetic* function itself, which concerns the formation of forms, the reference to art that allows aesthetics to put into action and become a privileged, paradigmatic manifestation. When she describes the artist, Laura Perls formulates her description in such a way that it could equally apply to the Gestalt therapist: "The main concern of the artist is certainly not the 'exercise of aesthetic transformation' of truth into beauty, but the organization of a multitude of various, disparate, incompatible experiences – which threaten the individual or society with disintegration and therefore are experienced as ugly – into a meaningful, integrated whole, a unity within which they make sense and which therefore is or may be experienced as beautiful" (L. Perls, 1992, p. 62).

- The *spiritual* function – which in my view cannot be based on a rational, logical way of thinking – is a form that is also rooted in the *aesthesis*: the sensitive. In certain subjects, this function seems to have a role similar to the aesthetic function in others. But perhaps this hypothesis belongs to another discussion.

This aesthetic function of the self, this formation of forms, is exercised daily in all human activity. What is emotion, then, if not a *form* that lets us manifest what we feel in the contact related to experienced situation and our personal history? What is a symptom if not the *form* that a subject constructs as a way of responding and adapting to a difficult context?

In his course at the Bauhaus, Paul Klee wrote: "The doctrine of Gestaltung deals with paths leading to the Gestalt, to the form [...] The word 'Gestaltung' is in direct contact with the concept [...] of a certain mobility" (Klee, 1998).

"We seek the meaning of each form formed in the act of formation itself," as Maldiney put it (1986), summing up Prinzhorn's main contribution concerning Gestaltung (1922).

When Prinzhorn describes what he calls the movements of expression, he lists, with the vocabulary of his time, a number of components at work in the Gestaltung: the urge to play and be active, enrichment of one's surroundings, the tendency to put into order, to reproduce, the need for symbols, the need to express, to give form… It is easy to make connections with concepts that define the attributes and functions of the self.

The self is the formation of forms, the architect of Gestaltung, followed by the formed form, to then return to being the formation of forms… according to the circular modality already demonstrated by Otto Rank: "the artist not only creates his art, but also uses art in order to create" (1932/1975, p. 7).

> "Experience is the only authentic theme of psychology. Psychology deals or should deal with experiencing beings, not with a mind or an intellect nor with a nervous system or an apparatus, not with a consciousness and data of consciousness, not with stimuli and motor responses. Psychology can be defined as a branch of knowledge dedicated to the study of experiencing beings" (Straus, 1966, p. 249).

The self is the organizer of contact,
the catalyst of experience and the artist of life.

Translated from French by Claire Blatz

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12.

Kenneth MEYER

Self : from american pragmatism to gestalt therapy

When we put our hand to the radiator,
we jerk it away. Whether the hotness
is in the radiator, or in the mind,
is a question of one's philosophy.
George Herbert Mead

While in my teaching experience the details of the "Theory of Self" -- the sequence and interruptions of contacting -- are well taught and appreciated, the actual *definition* of self is often treated lightly, both by faculty and trainees, and quickly forgotten if covered at all. I think there are several reasons for this, including the fact that it is not extensively explicated, as well as being subtly contradicted by later passages (Kitzler, 2007).

But a more pervasive factor in the basic definition of self being given short shrift, I believe, is that it seems to have no clinical implications of and by itself, whereas it challenges our predilection to hold tightly to the view that I, myself, am continuous, separate, substantial and (keeping one's fingers crossed) eternal.

It is these last two issues that I wish to address here:

- a presentation of the origins of the Theory of Self in American Pragmatism that enables us to grasp it better;
- an exploration of the clinical and technical refinements that this more explicated understanding offers.

Teaching/Learning the Theory of Self

The provisional solution we have
reached must be the final word:
the thoughts themselves
are the thinker.
--William James, 1892

The Difficulty with Language

Our foundational text (Perls, Heferline and Goodman, 1951) tells us that the Self is "the system of contacts at any moment" and, simultaneously, that it is the organizer of experience and the "agent of growth." This is a difficult complementarity for students to grasp -- that the self, as we use the term, is the organiz*er* and, at the same time, is what is organiz*ed*. Our languages require a separation, and an intervening space, between subject and object, and it is hard to find locutions that represent self-created and self-organizing processes or entities.

We teachers must therefore struggle against a persistent tendency to reify the self-process, to make a *thing* of it, rather that an *activity* whose very existence ebbs and flows. Time and time again, in folk psychology, academic theories and sophisticated philosophical discussion alike, we find references to the "self" that encourage us to imagine that, somewhere deep "inside" experience is "read off" by a homuncular entity, who also "operates" the body but is somehow separate from it (Dennett, 1991). The foundational concepts of Gestalt Therapy insist otherwise, namely that the self *is* one's lived and embodied experience.

This fallacy, or we may even say illusion, is possible because we are *self*-conscious, that is, we are able to reflect back on our own experience and actions. This reflection is itself a function of the self, a way of organizing one's experience, a mode we term the "personality-function." The problem, philosophically and therapeutically, comes when we take this reflective process, or the Gestalt that it creates, as if it were the actual self-process, retroactively insisting that this created, fictive entity is what was actually operative.

I am extremely careful, therefore, when regarding two very different, and frequently confused, uses of the term "self" One is the self-process, the "maker of figures" which never appears as an entity separate from experience itself, that is at the core of our theory (or faith). The other is what I call "the hyphenated self" the self of "self-esteem" "self-consciousness" "self-image" etc. -- in other words, this *object* we refer to as our "self" about which we can have ideas, feelings or on which we can have a stance.

Capitalizing "Self" as is often done, feeds into this tendency to concretize. For a time, those of us at the New York Institute used "selfing" as a verb, to remind ourselves that we are referring to a process, not an entity (Wolfert, 2000). The terminology used in describing the special "structures" of the self can also be misleading, so I am careful to refer to the "*temporary structuring of self*" rather than "*partial structures*"

But no languaging feeds into this tendency to concretize the self more than diagrams with "self" in the center, enclosed within a circle and labeled around it the various phases of experiencing or sequence of contacting. Even *Gestalt Therapy: History, Theory and Practice*, an otherwise well-crafted and thoughtful volume, begins with such an illustration (Woldt and Toman, 2005, p. x, fig 1). This and similar diagrams leave the impression that the self is an encapsulated entity that goes *through* various stages, rather than being the process of those phases themselves.

So before venturing further, we need to keep in mind that the workings of the self-process, as a function of the entire field, is seamless, that it is a continuous process of forming and reforming the structure of experience. When a particular organization of experience -- the *type of organization*, not a particular figure -- persists for a period of time, or re-occurs in a regular way, our text refers to a special "structure" of the self. And so, as to remind us that we are talking about temporarily organizing *toward a particular purpose*, they are referred to as "functions"

However, I think that we also need to remind ourselves that however we catalogue and name them, these are *our* parsing of a continuously fluctuating process. Our foundational text names three, namely an id-like function, an ego-like function and a personality-like function, rather admittedly parsed out to be analogous to familiar psychological entities. There obviously could be others, or sub-functions within each, and Goodman leaves it to the Phenomenologist to continue the task of describing and cataloguing the possible structures of the self (PHG, p. 156).

So we could just as well refer to a "threading-a-needle-function" of the self. We organize ourselves for the task by putting our attention almost wholly into our finger tips, converging our eyes for near vision, keeping the rest of our body still, and even holding our breath. I use this example to emphasize that we are referring to *functions* rather than entities.

It is this emphasis on *function* that is one of many clues that trace Gestalt therapy theory to the philosophical school known as Pragmatism. It is in examining these connections that we will see how to overcome our strong tendency to reify the self-process, and to assume that *from the beginning* there is, in each human body, an antecedent, pre-existing (if somewhat dim) self-consciousness that "grows"

Origins of the Theory of Self

In 1995, Richard Kitzler introduced the works of George Herbert Mead into his seminar on the Foundations of Gestalt Therapy. It was his thesis that Goodman was strongly influenced by Mead, whose thinking permeated the University of Chicago during Goodman's sojourn there, and that therefore PHG owes as much to American Pragmatism as to German Gestalt Psychology (Kitzler, 2007). At the time he offered no specific proof, other than some very striking similarities in their writings.

Personally, I needed no such proof, as this completely paralleled my own experience. Until Richard's seminar, I had wondered why I found Gestalt therapy so compatible with my already-formed orientation, but here I found Mead's approach utterly, even eerily, familiar. It was then that I suddenly remembered that the writings of Mead's mentor, John Dewey, in the Art as Experience (1934), was the very first book I was required to read at the University of Chicago -- required even before arriving on campus. In Richard's Foundations Seminar, I rediscovered the foundations of my own orientation.

As a scholar I was excited at being privy to a possible missing link between Dewey, Mead and Goodman. And as a therapist I was interested in how an understanding of Mead could clarify the founding and fundamental text of Gestalt therapy as written by Goodman. There is, of course, always the danger of reading Mead into Goodman or Goodman into Mead, but with two such dense texts in front of us, we need all the clues we can gather.

Mead's thinking provides a way around this tendency to slip a nascent self-awareness in, as an *a priori*, and instead provides an explanation as to how awareness of self, our personhood, precipitates *out* of the social field.

American Pragmatism and George Herbert Mead

George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) taught philosophy and social psychology at the University of Chicago, and, together with his mentor, John Dewey (1859-1952), was extremely influential in bringing an interactive and radically experiential orientation to the social sciences. Although he died in 1931, he was instrumental in creating the atmosphere at Chicago in which Sol Tax later developed "action anthropology" Carl Rogers developed "client-centered therapy" and Eugene Gendlin developed his practice of "focusing"

And it was in this atmosphere that a young and brilliant graduate student, Paul Goodman, formulated his views of psychological development and social interactions. While Goodman does not give a single reference to the Pragmatists, in a letter to a friend he refers to our beloved PHG as "Freud & Reich & James & Dewey & Laotze" (Goodman, 1994, p.120) More

importantly, there are entire passages of Goodman's text that parallel Mead's published lectures.

Mead's teachers and mentors were William James (1842–1910) and John Dewey (1859- 1952), and Mead's contributions extended this lineage of the Chicago School of Pragmatism. A brief mention of the tenets of Pragmatism will be enough, I hope, for you to accept that, despite our German moniker, this is in fact our lineage also.

From James and Dewey Mead adopted the view of mind as *selective*, a functional grouping of contents derived from, but not exactly mirroring, the environment. The organism is not passive, but *interested,* carving out a world from the flux of experience. Mead also adopted their holism, extending their view of mind as embedded in conduct, in which the parts of an action are inseparable, the end being inherent in the beginning. And he shared their radical empiricism, what we now would call an experiential orientation, in which things that are in other philosophies considered substances or transcendental elements are recast in terms of the continuities of sense-experience.

While Mead shared Dewey's insistence that mind be understood within the context of Nature, what he brought to the social sciences was a broader and more contemporary scientific world-view, particularly the introduction of field theory. In his effort to bring relativity and field theory into psychology, the notion of *perspective* or frame-of-reference continually informs his outlook.

Mead's main contention is that human communication, social cohesiveness and, as we shall see later in more detail, the existence of selves are all possible because, unlike animals who are bound by direct stimuli and response, we are capable of "taking the role of the other" Mead eventually used the term taking the "perspective" or "standpoint" of the other, instead of, as he did in his best-known writings, the "role" of the other. I find this a more useful and accurate phrase in that it subsumes not only the behavior of the other social actors, but the *point-of-view* that is the ground of their actions. However, it should be noted that Mead perspective "arises out of a relation of an active, selective, percipient event and its environment....through contact" (Miller 1973, p.213).

Mead begins with the observation that for true *communication* to take place, as opposed to a simple exchange of *signals* that act as stimuli, the speaker must take into account the frame of reference of the hearer, must "take the role of the other" The simplest of social interactions – "How are you?" – evokes more than an introspective response. "How long has it been since I've seen this person, what is his time-frame? Does he know about my divorce? Is there a note of immediate concern in his voice or on his face? Is this just chit-chat?" All of this taking-the-point-of-view of the other goes into forming our response. There is no such thing as a purely introspective report. For Mead, reflection is irreducibly intersubjective (Vessy, 1998).

Mead's understanding of field theories also lead him to formulate the concept of a "social object" an entity that exists with a certain *kind* of objective reality. A baseball game, for example, is one such "social object" in the fact that each of the players not only knows and acts within his own role, but knows and acts in anticipation of the roles of every other player. It is this *organization* of "role-taking" *internalized in each player* that constitutes social objects and gives them both a coherency and an objectivity of sorts. "They are 'objective' in the sense that they provide frames of reference and shared patterns of behavior for members of communities" (Aboulafia, 2008).

His epistemology, sometimes referred to as *objective relativity*, is actually more radically experiential than the often repeated example of a game. *All* objects are social objects, in the fact that they are "cut out" of the flux of experience by their utility to the community, and are named by it. And his understanding of the social field is much more fluid in the fact that social Gestalten evolve, e.g. "rugby" becomes "football" "matrimony" becomes "life-partnership" Individuals modify and change social forms. Institutions are born, grow, split apart or dissolve. Social objects over-lap, merge and synthesize. Language itself, the system of "vocal gestures" that creates community in the first place, changes and is changed by other social objects.

Genesis of the Empirical Self

Whereas many social theorists begin with the question of how individuals come to form a social compact, Mead focuses on the issue is how one's personhood coalesces *out of* the larger social field. What he terms "reflective consciousness" is based first on the view of others, and only gradually becomes self-reflection.

Mead states that the essential problem of understanding the genesis of an empirical self, is this "How can a person get outside of himself (experientially) in such a way as to become an object to himself?" (1934, p. 138) The answer is to be found only "by referring to the process of social conduct or activity in which the given person or individual is implicated" that is, by looking to the larger social situation in which the person is embedded.

There can be no "internal" until a boundary is established, and this boundary comes about through contact in the larger field. Taking the role of the other gives one's self an "outside" as much as it gives the other an "inside"

Thus our original standpoint, our Archimedean point for forming a self, is the perspective of the community, the "generalized other" The "perceptual consciousness" the "I" first gets to know the "me" the "empirical self" through others, and only gradually correlates this with an internal identification as one's self. One *achieves* personhood.

> The individual experiences himself as such, not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoints of other individual members of the same social group... For he enters his own experience as a self... not directly or immediately, not by becoming a subject to himself, but only in so far as he first becomes an object to himself just as other individuals are objects to him... and he becomes an object to himself only by taking the attitudes of other individuals toward himself within a social environment (1934, p. 142).

The understanding of one's self *as* a self, then, arises as a social object *just like any other*, with this one crucial difference – once it has arisen, the self can provide social experiences for itself in the form of internal conversation, and "so we can *conceive* of a solitary self [emphasis mine]" We therefore tend to treat it as something more enduring, more substantive, and more important than other social objects. We become, shall we say, rather attached to it.

The "I" and the "Me"

Mead's distinction between the spontaneous "I" and the reflected "me" is expanded in one of his more lucid passages, and is worth quoting at length, for it gives us another way of expressing a theory of self-as-process that not only avoids the pull toward reification of the self, but contributes to an understanding of this very tendency (ibid, p. 174-175) .

> The simplest way of handling the problem would be in terms of memory. I talk to myself, I remember what I said and perhaps the emotional content that went with it. The 'I' of this moment is present in the 'me' of the next moment. There again, *I cannot turn around quick enough to catch myself* [emphasis mine]. I become a 'me' insofar as I remember what I said. The 'I' can be given, however, this functional relationship. It is because of the 'I' that we are never fully aware of what we are, that we surprise ourselves by our own action. It is as we act that we are aware of ourselves. It is in memory that the 'I' is constantly present in experience. We can go back directly only a few moments in our experience, and then we are dependent upon memory images for the rest. So that the 'I' in memory is there as the spokesman of the self of the second, or minute, or day ago. As given, it is a 'me' but it is a 'me' that was the 'I' at the earlier time. If you ask then, where directly in your own experience does the 'I' come in, the answer is that it comes in as an historical figure. It is what you were a second ago that is the 'I' of the 'me'.

There are several features of this description worth noting. First, it is essential to our understanding to view self as a *temporal* process, the "I" and "me" being oscillating phases of this process. Second, the "I" never appears directly in experience. One doesn't really know what one is going to say until one hears one's self say it. Third, when we attempt to introspectively catch a glimpse of the "I" the best we can get is, so to speak, its shadow, like a scientist looking at vapor trails in a bubble-chamber marking the path of a passing cosmic ray.

The "I" and the "me" are set against each other as alternating respondents, the "I" being spontaneous and creative, the "me" taking the conservative position of incorporated societal expectations, the "generalized other"

Mead thus sees this interplay of the "I" and the "me" as a basically rational process of weighing consequences and/or figuring out how to communicate with and influence the group. Therefore, unlike the Id vs. the Super-ego, Mead is optimistic about the novel and spontaneous coming through in conduct, against both the internalized roles and the actual social group. Group norms and symbols can and do change, and this change is always initiated by individuals. Furthermore, the impulsive and novel-seeking aspect of the self is seen as making a positive contribution to a continual "reconstitution" of society.

One of the most intriguing and attractive aspects of Mead's thought is how he manages to see the entire universe as structured by the *social*, yet maintains the highest regard for the creativity of the individual, the very values that permeate PHG.

The Personality-Function

At this point I hope it will not take much to convince you that Mead's uncatchable "I" is the self-process at work, and that his empirical "me" is the functional equivalent of what Goodman terms the "personality function"

Here is Mead's description (ibid, p. 160 – 162) of how personality is formed:

> What goes on in the game goes on in the life of the child all the time. He is continually taking the attitudes of those about him, especially those who in some sense control him and on whom he depends... There are all sorts of social organizations, some of which are fairly lasting, some temporary, into which the child is entering, and he is playing a sort of social game in them... he gets into organizations that come into existence and pass out of existence... A person is a personality because he belongs to a community, because he takes over the institutions of that community into his own conduct.

And Goodman's personality (PHG, p.p. 203-204):

> The aftermath of creative social contact is the formation of personality: group identifications and viable rhetorical and moral attitudes... Group-identification that has fulfilled needs and powers and is a source of strength for further action is the habit of loyalty... [M]oral evaluations, judgments of proper behavior, combine two kinds of assimilation: technical skills that one has learned, guesses as to what leads to success... [or] one acts in a certain way because it is the social expectation, the expectation of one's formed.

There are numerous instances of such parallel formulations, but I will point out only one other – Goodman's emphasis (p. 160) on the personality function as taking the "rhetorical attitude" much like Mead's interplay of the "I" and "me"

> The personality is the system of attitudes assumed in interpersonal relations, is the assumption of what one is, serving as the ground on which one could explain one's behavior, *if the explanation were asked for* [emphasis mine].

So who is asking? Mead would say, of course, that this is the "me" asking, taking the role of the "generalized other". Goodman's terminology implies much the same – the personality is "essentially a verbal replica of the self; it is that which answers a question *or self-question* [emphasis mine]"

It is as we approach our clinical material that Mead's usefulness to us wanes, for Mead's task, as a social psychologist, is to develop general explanations about how societies function. He is not primarily interested in individual or group dysfunction. Although he does make some occasional, wry comments about human foibles regarding self-image, his formal theory seems rather sanguine about how rational and objective the personality can be.

Clinical Implications

Properly speaking, a man has as many social selves
as there are individuals who recognize him
and carry an image of him in their mind.
William James, 1890

We do well by Mead. We support our client's ego-like functions that assert against the limits of the group, whether actual or internalized. We attempt to teach our clients how to turn around quick enough that the "I" of the "me" is the "I" of a moment ago rather than of hours, weeks or years ago. But from our clinical experience, to say nothing of our own introspection, we also know that in our retrospective explanations we tend to be more rational, more foresight, more thoughtful and more in control of our destiny than could possibly be the case.

Introjects

Goodman gives somewhat more acknowledgment than Mead that the "verbal replica" of the self can be a less-than-faithful reconstruction, consisting of "a number of mistaken concepts of oneself, introjects, ego-ideals, masks, etc." And he mentions, almost as an aside, the pervasive influence of "forgotten interpersonal relations" that remain unaware and in the background.

Chairwork and Dreamwork

The internalized "community" and its members that form our sense of the expectations and rules of others are generally referred to as "introjects" Since the bulk of my training had been in the atmosphere of what I call "standard NY psychoanalytic therapy" I had had a bias toward thinking of these as being, well, for the most part, *Mothers*. But considering the role of Mead's "generalized other" in forming the personality, I was led to start asking clients, with a more open mind, "Who is watching?" or "Who is your audience?"

Such inquiries quickly identified individual versions of introjects that are quite general, yet visualized in very specific ways – "The Committee in the Sky" "The Neighbors" "Keepers of My Permanent Record" These general introjects are not at all as abstract or vague as the labels that clients give them may sound. They are *felt presences* that exist in space. When asked further, clients already had visualizations of these introjects, and could even point to them, in a very specific direction, usually somewhere above.

This insight, that introjects are internal dialogues with *felt presences*, has guided my work and teaching ever since. Gestalt therapy and counseling texts often refer to introjects as "powerful messages…a belief, idea or feeling in relation to oneself" (Shub, 2000, p. 99) or "societal rules" (Joyce and Sills, 2010, p. 125), as if it is these verbal formulations that need to be addressed. Although at times these verbal summaries can be useful to refer to -- a vocabulary and reference that develops between me and a client -- effective work with introjects requires actually identifying the *felt presence* of these introjected figures. And since many of these "messages" were not originally delivered verbally, but conveyed by a

look, voice-tone and/or gesture, seeking verbal formulations from the client can become a mutually misleading endeavor.

> Joy was a 30 year-old social worker who quite consistently made a "tsk" sound in the middle or at the end of her sentences. She was quite unaware of this until I brought her attention to it, and at that point I suggested that she make *only* the "tsk" sound for a bit. Almost immediately a gesture spontaneously joined – a flicking of her right hand, as if shooing a fly away. My suggestion then was she see what words might go with it. The words also came immediately. "That's not important. That's my mother, dismissive. Her attitude is that nothing but her concerns are important."

So we now had a verbal formulation that we both could refer to when relevant to her "you're not important" belief about herself. But it is crucial to recognize that these words were never spoken, and that the influence on her present behavior is better noted by the presence of her mother in her habit of "tsk-ing", not by verbal memory or belief. Joy now had a very specific cue for catching herself treating herself, or letting herself be treated as "not important".

Mead's description of the internalization process makes it clear that our introjects may not be at all consistent, because they are dialogues with the various communities of which we are or have been a part. And as a social psychologist, he was interested in groups and communities, but the views of these communities are most often mediated by specific representatives. Linda, for example feels her face get warm when her mother is present for her, as if standing over her, whereas the back of her neck gets warm when the nuns are present for her, as if they are sneaking up behind her. Summarizing this as a "good girl introject" would not only miss the embodied presence of her different environments, but the subtle though important distinctions between being a "good daughter" versus a "good Catholic-school girl".

This is why I tell students to "never put a mother in the chair", a pithy way to convey that, ideally, no one is *put* in the empty chair. Perls' chairwork begins by detecting someone *already present* in the room, usually to the client but sometimes first to the therapist. Besides, mothers seldom sit in chairs. They hover over you, or flit busily about, or come into your bedroom at inconvenient moments -- but seldom sit down.

Chairwork and Dreamwork

I have written elsewhere about the integration of the relational and psychodramatic approaches in Gestalt psychotherapy (Meyer, 2014) and Friedman (2003) has traced several overlooked connections between Perls,

and Perls's later work. But if we take seriously that we all have various, sundry and overlapping audiences present to us, then the methods imported from psychodrama seem a natural set of experiments to employ.

The following passage in PHG serves as a natural call for what has become known as "chairwork"

> In neurotic splitting, one part is kept in unawareness or... alienated from concern or both parts are carefully isolated from each other and made to seem irrelevant to each other... But if one concentrates awareness on the... "irrelevant" connections, then anxiety develops... The method of treatment is to come into closer and closer contact with the present crisis, until one identifies, risking the leap into the unknown, with the coming creative integration of the split. (PHG, p. 17)

Note that respondents in chairwork are only considered "parts" in that they have been kept carefully and rigidly isolated from each other even when conscious they are not fully, bodily felt. What we are referring to here are not "parts of the self" that become integrated through chairwork, but alternative organizations of the self that have been "carefully isolated" and treated *as if* they were mutually irrelevant or irreconcilable.

It is therefore quite contrary to my basic understanding of the self-as-process to label one half of the dialogue as being the "self" and the other as a projection, or introjection, or, as in dreamwork, an "alienated part of the self". I have seen many instances, including several films of Fritz, where the client is in dialogue with an aspect of themselves, be it dream-figure, projection or introject, as if the person in the hot seat is their "real self" and the occupant of the "empty chair" is some split-off aspect. Neither is the real self. The real self is the process of dialoguing. Gestalt dialogues (the term used before "chairwork" became popular) are always between isolated organizations of self.

This brings me to a very subtle point – the protagonist in our dreams is not our "self" either. Again, dreamwork is often done as if the true, authentic, real self is present in the dialogue -- and it is, but as the dream-worker, not as a player in the dream. Like every other figure and object in the dream it is a particular aspect, a specific organization, of the dreamer, only one having a *perspective* that we identify as our own (Thompson, 2015). As one astute student put it, "we are not ourselves in our dreams, but *avatars* of our self" (Cha, 2015).

Death Layer

Niels Bohr is reputed to have said that "Those who are not shocked when they first come across quantum mechanics cannot have understood it" So might

one who first wrestles with our understanding of self-as-process, trying to grasp that we actually have no direct access to the person that imagine ourselves to be -- we only get a glimpse in a rear-view mirror. Nor do we have the continuity or separateness that we prefer to claim.

I have no question that Fritz Perls was drawn to the theatrical (after all, he had trained with Max Rheinhardt) and to dramatic formulations, but the expectation that someone going through a profound personal transformation will suffer an ego-death, a loss of self-identity, and subsequent lack of attachment to one's self image, has a long and venerable history, from shamanic initiation to the Eleusinian Mysteries to psychedelic psychotherapy (Alnaes, 1964; Groff, 1988).

Again, Perls's language encourages reification – the "structure of neurosis" and the "layers of personality" bring us back to a structural model. Understood rather as a description of the change-process, it offers important understandings. And there does often come a point in this process of personal transformation at which the client does give up neurotically maintained "supports" and "slip his or her moorings and… experience this free fall, this loss of one's bearings, this breathlessness, the original anxiety, the fear of abandonment and death" (Friedman, 1993).

But what are these "supports" that one must let go of, the props that keep us from ego-death? Perls was very sensitive to, one might even say reactive to, efforts to manipulate "environmental" support, i.e. the "games" played earlier in the change process that evoked help, advice-giving, sympathy, etc. But if we take seriously the idea that we play to an internal audience, those "forgotten interpersonal relations" the death-layer experience can be understood as what happens when one totally gives up on gaining approval, applause or direction from these internalized figures.

And when we do, when we lose those figures, ideas and accomplishments that we have used to convince ourselves of our continuity and identity, what Kohut (1977) calls "selfobjects" and Ngakpa Rinpoche (2002) calls "reference points" we are not only lost but experience for a time, the dire consequences of failing to exist in the human community. For some patients it is freezing to death, for others floating forever in outer space, and yet for others dissolving, burning or rotting away. The variations on exile and death that our minds can present to us are endless.

It thus may seem paradoxical, then, that only when we let go of these on-lookers, the multiple communities and mediating individuals who were so important in developing a self, that we become more in contact with the social nature of our existence. The freedom gained in "destroying" these introjects allows one to meet others without these presences shaping our contacting. To put it most simply, we stop watching ourselves.

This brings us to egotism.

Egotism and Spirituality

In the heat of creative contact,
one says, 'It is this, not that,'
and now [on reflection],
'It is only this,
let us open our minds to that.'
Paul Goodman, 1951

A self that can open its mind to the perspective of another can never be a static personality. But when this process is arrested -- when one must instead defend who one feels one is, or wants one's self to be, or wants to be seen as -- there occurs an interruption of contact with the immediate, and, concomitantly, a fixed view of the environment.

We already have a term for this – "Egotism", which may be viewed as the extreme form of autonomy (PHG, p. 237). The egotist defending his *idea* of himself "wards off surprises of the environment by seeking to isolate himself as the only reality... His problem ceases to be one of contacting some 'Thou' for which he is concerned, but multiplying sciences and acquaintances and bringing more and more of the environment into his scope and power *in order to be himself irrefutable* [emphasis mine]"

Egotism removes one from the environment, while maintaining an illusion, sometimes an extremely convincing one, that one is embedded in it. This is not a schizoid position, where one feels unreal; on the contrary, one considers one's self to be *more* substantial, and more *enduring*, than one is actually. Those who can wield power shape their environment to fit their idea of themselves. Those who have less power create paranoid enclaves for themselves. But this is all quite "normal" pathology, often supported, explicitly, by ego-psychology and self-psychology approaches to therapy.

My suggestion is that one reason Egotism has been neglected so much as one of the disturbances of contact is because this "final concern for one's boundaries and identity" is best viewed as a personality-function disturbance. The question here is how one *assimilates* experience, whether there is a re-organization of the personality or simply an agglutination of bits of experience. We might find at times little obvious loss of ego-function *per se*, but instead a pervasive and on-going failure of, or defense against, *re-organizing* one's sense of self, thus avoiding suffering, for even a moment, not knowing who one is.

The 'me' or the personality, is the dramas we create, the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. Perhaps this is why we are so exquisitely sensitive to the stories *others* tell about us. It is not simply that we lose control over who is telling the story, although this loss of authorship is often frightening or painful

in itself. Ultimately, however, hearing others give us their version of ourselves confronts us with the fact that *both* their version and ours are *only* stories.

We would all rather think that we have a continuous and essential self, that we are the same person, fundamentally, that we were at age eight, or, that if we had grown up as a nineteenth century Sioux, we still would be *essentially* the same person, albeit wearing feathers. Such is the stuff of judgment and prejudice – "If *I* were in that situation, *I* wouldn't take welfare"

In emphasizing our "sociality", Mead is referring to an on-going and repeated process of leaving one's perspective to assume that of another, and then *collating* these perspectives, thereby continually developing new perspectives that take the perspectives of others into account. This does not mean accepting that the others are somehow more in the right, in any fundamental sense, than one's self, only that one's contact with the Gestalt of the situation, the social object being jointly participated in, is more complete to the degree that one opens oneself to including an understanding of the point-of-view of others.

Is there an ultimate perspective? Mead thinks not. Such Absolutes are Hegelian and Newtonian. The best that we can do, our very best, is to come to understand the *transformations* necessary to take the perspective of the other, and to become increasingly sophisticated in our ability to *organize* these perspectives. For ego-bound humans, this is a major spiritual accomplishment, which might be termed an extreme form of sanity.

Margherita Spagnuolo-Lobb has raised the question of the final aim of Gestalt therapy, suggesting that we look beyond simply knowing one's self to addressing the disturbance of egotism (2013, p. 88). Our discussion of Mead's understanding of *taking the viewpoint of the other* as the fundamental engine of the emergence (and renewal) of a self points us in the same direction.

Gestalt Therapy implicitly, and in Goodman's definition of Egotism, explicitly, encourages us to confront and let go of the fixed position required to maintain our ego-centric stance. The thrust of the entire work is toward an understanding of how to *live*, rather than *defend*, our lives, of how to live without egotistical fixations that protect us from knowing our vulnerability in the face of constant change and eternity.

But this subtle and pervasive egotism is precisely and exactly the issue that the teachings of spiritual schools have perennially addressed. Mead and the pragmatists may seem a strange segue to a discussion of spirituality, but Mead's comment that "*I cannot turn around quick enough to catch myself*" is in fact a mediation practice in Mahayana Buddhism. Practitioners are encouraged to find the watcher until they accept that they cannot find an abiding "self" The doctrine of No-Self (*anatman*) does not mean that a self does not exist, but that it does not exist *in the way that we imagine it does* (Hayward, 1999, p. 386). In Buddhist psychology, the self is referred to as

a "mind-stream" much like William James' description of the "stream of thought"

I find it interesting that "Egotism" is not considered at all in the experiential volume of PHG, and is the very last concept introduced in *Gestalt Therapy*, ten pages before the end. *Gestalt Therapy* therefore, ends at what our society views as the boundary between psychotherapy and spiritual work. Several observers have commented on the *influence* of Eastern spirituality, Buddhism, and Taoism in the development of Gestalt Therapy, presenting psychotherapy and spiritual teachings as the distinct social objects that they were in the Western society of the 1950s. However, in the last few pages of his opus Goodman leaves us the possibility of their being melded into a new social Gestalt.

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13.

Lynne JACOBS

Meaningfulness, Directionality and Sense of Self

"Self" has no stand-alone status

Blame it on Saint Augustine. He spoke of the necessity to look within oneself to reach toward God. His ideas were popular, and formed a foundation for a notion of an "inner" self. And of course, Descartes and the ensuing Cartesian era made an inner self seem so natural that there was no point in questioning it. (Taylor, 1989, p. 156)

When the voices of Gestalt Therapy (among many post-Cartesian theories of human living) posit that there is no inner self, that self is really just a description of a certain function of being-in-the-world, such a voice is a whisper that fails to counteract millennia of habits of thought that tell us there is such a thing as an inner self.

The whisper is beginning to gain some traction, at least in scholarly circles.

These days there are many efforts to redefine self as a contextually emerging, intersubjective phenomenon. For instance, in philosophy there are arguments positing that self is a "narrative self" (Taylor, 1989, Schechtman, 2011), a "dialogical self" (Taylor, 1991, Hermans 2011, Staemmler, 2015), a "hermeneutic self" (Taylor, 1989). These are variations on constructionist definitions of self (Gergen, 2011), all of which posit the fundamental relationality of self. And the gestalt therapy notion of self fits neatly into each of these different yet overlapping conceptions of self.

Of course, one of the earliest of these philosophical efforts was the American pragmatist relational conception of self, which influenced Paul Goodman's gestalt therapy notion of self. George Mead, a pragmatist/social interaction theorist who Goodman especially admired, posited that it is only through social interaction that a *sense* of self is even possible.

All of these theories of self are useful approaches to a radically relational understanding of human living Also, each of the theories mentioned above is strongly phenomenological, and uses "self" to refer to experience, to a *sense* of self. And yet, occasionally, most still fall back into referring to an entity – "*the* self"

I applaud the effort that our founders made to develop a thoroughly process understanding of this impossible construct, self. They gave us an invaluable template for making sense of contacting. Contacting is not a willy-nilly, random and disorganized phenomenon. Rather, our contacting processes are organized through the intentionality of the ID of the situation, ego functioning, and personality functioning. All of which are simultaneously at play in any contacting process, and all of which are aspects of self-functioning. Hence, our contacting is self-organizing and has directionality to it, as opposed to randomness.

As I wrote elsewhere (Jacobs, 2007):

> While I know full well, and appreciate, that Gestalt therapy theory has developed a post-Cartesian theory of self that points to "self" as process, as integrative function, and as contextually-emergent (e.g., there is no isolated pre-existent self, only continually changing emergent self/environment configurations of field), I think explanatory (as opposed to experiential or phenomenal) concepts of self have outlived their usefulness. The explanatory concept, "self" has a long history of being embedded within the Cartesian world-view of isolated, discrete, separable entities, including human entities. We have no word for the radical re-visioning of what gestalt therapy means by "self" -- the self that is always in process, always being made/making itself/being made in the moment. The self that is an open system that breaks down the usual reductionist pairing of self with one person's skin boundary. Without a word that can break us out of age-old habits, Gestalt therapists, not unlike other therapists, often confuse explanatory and experiential perspectives on self, which leads, despite our best efforts to the contrary, to a "homunculus" concept of self.
>
> Evidence of this in gestalt conversations is the frequency with which one finds the term "inner" experience used. The idea that an experience is "inner" is a remnant of Cartesian thinking, kept alive in part by a seemingly inescapable history of usage of the term "self" As another example, there is evidence of the reification of a homunculus in *Gestalt*

> *Therapy.* "But where the self has power to draw on, it has precisely no sense of security. It has perhaps a sense of excitement..." (Perls *et al*, 1994, p. 123). Self, as an explanatory concept, cannot have a "sense" of anything. People have senses of things. This is the confusion of the explanatory level of discussion and the phenomenological level. I wish our founders had instead simply critiqued and abandoned "self" as an explanatory concept altogether!
>
> Thus, my preference is to use the term "self" only to refer to experience, or as a specific grammatical reference to a person. I do not use it as an explanatory concept. So the term "self" speaks to our *sense* of ourselves as being a subject, or having subjectivity, or to self-referential capacities such as self-regulation. As for subjectivity, I prefer the notion of experiential world rather than subjectivity because I think it better captures the contextually-emergent nature of our awareness and how that awareness is shaped. At any rate, I think of the content and shaping process of our experiential worlds as emergent from our original family, historical and cultural contexts, as well as the phenomenal fields we inhabit as we go through life. Obviously, our experiential worlds are shaped most crucially by our interpersonal surroundings. I am reminded here of Peter Philippson's image of the Escher painting of two hands drawing each other (2001). That is a marvelous depiction of relational, contextually-emergent selfhood (pp. 7 and on)

So, given all this, I wish that rather than just critique older notions of self, PHG had abandoned the idea altogether. I prefer to use the term, "self" as an identifier only, referring to something about "me." Thus, there are many times I use the word, but almost always with a modifier, such as self-regulation, self-experience, self-process, sense of self, selfhood, etc. Sense of self is particularly useful, as I will address further on.

I also think that a focus on self is a distraction from a focus on contact, on meeting the other. The most eloquent refutation of our concern with self that I have ever read is offered by educator Mark Freeman, in his latest book, *The Priority of the Other* (2014). He picks up on what so many in Gestalt therapy are pointing to (see for just a few examples, Bloom, 2012, Philippson, 2009, Robine, 2011, Wheeler, 2000). He offers an "audacious assertion",

> It could very well be that the quantity of attention devoted to the self, in psychology especially, is, in part, a *mistake*. Bear in mind that I have no interest here in "deconstructing" the self or exposing it as a bourgeois reification or wiping it off the face of the earth (etc.). Ourselves, as we have come to know them, are here to stay, at least for a while; the direction

of history doesn't change overnight. What's more, it is amply clear that ourselves are important to us; so it is that we protest when ourselves or those of others, are denied, negated, or hurt, or when our creativity and freedom are not given room to grow and flourish. In addition, many people seek self-gratification and self-fulfillment and self-improvement. They try to be self-actualized; they seek to realize and develop their own unique potential as selves, as specific people, with specific arrays of interests, abilities, talents, and desires. But there is something extremely curious about the way all of this has been understood and framed for many years... Appearances notwithstanding, the experiences and things that generally provide the greatest yield of meaning of existential "nourishment" have little to do with ourselves. They derive instead from what is *other* than self, outside of it.

Consider too the practice of psychotherapy. It seems fair to say that much of modern psychotherapy remains directed towards one's self. This, at any rate is the way it is often talked about. There are self-esteem problems and distortions of self-image and disturbances in the sphere of self-regard. One's self can be weak or impaired or incomplete, and thus in need of being "restored." Often, however, it is not *self* that needs to be restored, but the *world*--that is, the world within which one can live and thrive. Certain forms of anxiety and depression often lead people to excessive self-concerns. The self is exactly that which they cannot get out of, and as a result they can derive no sustenance from the world, no nourishment. Indeed, at an extreme, the world, the real world is virtually absent, unavailable; the only world inhabited is thus the closed and often ugly one that has been fashioned by the self. The therapeutic task therefore is to help bring this self back to the real world, the one with real people and places and things, the one that can nourish the self and feed its hunger to be... In this sense, self is secondary; the other comes first and is thus the primary source of meaning, value, and existential nourishment (p. 5).

Freeman could have often simply substituted the word, 'person' for 'self,' and had an even more powerful statement. For instance, when he wrote of the therapeutic task, he could have written: "The therapeutic task therefore is to help bring this *person* back to the real world, the one with real people and places and things, the one that can nourish the *person* and feed its hunger to be." Leaving that criticism aside, I find his statement an evocative affirmation of Gianni Francesetti's (2012) efforts to call our attention to the "presence of absence" and to the sensible aesthetics of the present situation, which is, at any given moment, the world (pp. 7-13). Once you are responding to your sense of

the situation, you are more involved with something that is beyond yourself. The other, which is the actual source of yourself, calls you forth, interpenetrates with you.

The meaningfulness and directionality of leading a life

In my clinical work, I draw on notions of meaningfulness, directionality, and what philosopher Richard Wollheim (1984) called, "leading a life" Marcia Cavell, a psychoanalyst, introduced readers to Wollheim's idea in her article "The self: growth, integrity, and coming apart" (2011). Wollheim wants to abandon the concept of self and replace it with "leading a life."

Meaningfulness, directionality and leading a life are some of my guideposts for the being-in-the-world that is contacting. Contacting is being-in-the-world on a moment-by-moment basis. Leading a life takes into account the functions - id function (the pre-differentiated, beginning sensing of the situation), ego function (being attracted and repulsed, choosing, deciding, sorting among options and capacities and resources) and personality function (moving and responding in coordinated ways that fit my sense of what matters as I move through on-going processes of creative adjustments) that comprise the Gestalt therapy idea of self. But it does so in more experiential language, and in a way that adds a more comprehensive understanding of the forward thrust of contacting. I prefer the more experiential language. Leading a life is what PHG refer to as the "directionality of contacting" Let me lay the groundwork first by using Gestalt therapy. PHG (p. 153), in the section on "Self as Actualization of the Potential" makes the point that, as the process of contacting develops along from the ground of the potentialities in any given situation:

> The self experiences itself as identifying with some of the possibilities and alienating others. The future, the coming, is that directedness of this process out of the many possibilities toward a new single figure.

If one forgives how the first sentence is a problematic example of self-as-entity, their point was that the new figure speaks on behalf of a person's purpose-in-situation. Similarly, Jean-Marie Robine refers to "intentionality" as a property of the Id of the situation, and then the more specifically formed, "intention" as a necessary component of contacting. Intention is the "now-for-next" The intentionality in the Id of situation is pre-differentiated, vaguely sensed, and will be clarified as our bodies continue to respond. As clarification develops, a clearer sense of intention emerges. Robine makes a very important

point, by the way, that when we are engaged with others, we would not be able to respond meaningfully if we were not already "reading" the intention that is likely unspoken, and yet visible (or, sensible). Every contact episode is action, a movement of the field, and every action a creative adjustment, and is therefore an individuating event. Directionality, intentionality and intention point to what it means to live an individual life (XX).

Please note, when I refer to intentionality, I am not assuming that the intentionality itself, and the more refined intentions that emerge, are entirely freely chosen. Our intentionality is as much a middle zone event as are emotions. Intentionality is as much a response as it is an initiation. Response and initiation cannot be neatly parsed. By the same token, when I refer to individualization, and to an individual life, I do not refer to individualism. However, my singular life can only be lived by me, and my experiences cannot possibly be exactly the same as anyone else's, despite the fact that my entire experiential world is infused with my contact with others and my socio-cultural, historical context. Contacting cannot help but be an individuating event, which makes the meeting of the contact possible. Individuating is a process that is directional, guided by intentionality. This is where leading a life comes in. Cavell writes:

> To lead a life means to have something like a conception of a life, one's own life, projects, goals, and moral values. Wollheim's idea implies that "person" is not a mere descriptive term, but also an evaluative one... Only a creature who is focused on the present, enriched by the past, and headed toward the future, is leading a life.

As expressive of intention, leading a life is not completely freely chosen. It involves surrender. It is not egoistic. And yet, we are guided, and we do aim in certain directions, based on what has come to matter to us over time.

The selfhood of now-for-next

Overall, I think Gestalt therapy theory has neglected exploring the significance of the over-arching project of leading a life. We develop stories about ourselves. Goodman called these stories "the rhetorical attitude" which some philosophers expand into the idea of a narrative self. But the rhetorical attitude became reduced to a personality function, and personality function has gotten a bad name in some Gestalt therapy circles, as if our personalities are merely impediments to spontaneous, expansive contacting. Importantly, stories also reflect worlds of meaningfulness, without which our lives would be adrift

and empty. For example, dialogical philosopher Charles Taylor points out, we are inescapably ethically situated in relation to each other. "One of the most basic aspirations of human beings [is] the need to be connected to, or in contact with, what they see as good, or of crucial importance, or of fundamental value" (p. 42). He points out this pertains to such things as being a good caretaker, but equally to being a loyal pal to fellow criminals. Taylor's point is that such an orientation is impossible to avoid, it is an inescapable dimension of being meaning-making and valuing creatures always situated in particular contexts (Taylor, 1989).

We all know the constraining power of our personalities. But it is the guiding power that our personalities also provide, the wish to lead a *particular* life that brings people to therapy in the first place. They have longings, wishes, strivings that propel them into therapy. We also know very well from experience that what they want for themselves is often their biggest problem. The specific contents of their wishes and their problems are reflections of just how much their personality is governed by habitus. And yet their symptoms are signs that they refuse to be led by habitus alone. Appreciating that symptoms are rebellion against received wisdom is a cornerstone of gestalt therapy.

Habitus is our embodied expression of an impersonal form of social acculturation that interpenetrates every fiber of our being. Without our conscious participation, we learn how to be members in our community. It is always part of the pre-differentiation in the Id of the situation that therapist and patient inhabit together. It shapes our experiential worlds, our body postures and movements, our tastes and preferences. It is the ground of our personalities.

Our unruly bodies are our chance to live as more than our habitus dictates to us. The contents of our patients' problems may provide no specific clue as to what it means for them to individuate instead of live by habit alone. But the inspiration to do so, to lead a life, has brought them to our door. Their bodies as well as ours, and the resonances and dissonances as our bodies react to each other, are the opening to leading our lives. This is the quest for selfhood, a sense of meaningfulness in how we live. Although our bodies are interpenetrated by habitus, any new moment, one in which the resources and sensibilities of one body meet the resources and sensibilities of another body, provides a new possibility, however tiny. This is an example of the aesthetics of presence, the aesthetics of being-in-situation. And of course, body-awareness is one of the pillars of Gestalt therapy.

I cannot write about meaningfulness, selfhood or leading a life without some mention of dignity. A sense of dignity is an inherent part of living our lives. It is not a concept common to our theory. I have not seen if mentioned as a self-function, and yet it is essential to the experience of being a human being among other humans. A sense of dignity includes such things as a sense of

worth, a sense of autonomy and choice, a sense of being human among fellow humans, a sense of meaning or purpose, and a sense of having a personal idiom, or uniqueness. These are all dimensions of leading a life. And it is often assaults on one's dignity, and an implicit wish to gain or restore dignity, that brings them to therapy in the first place (Jacobs, in press).

A patient's sense of dignity is never far from my mind when I'm having conversations with my patients, or when I am bearing witness or even when I am arguing with them. There is an overall felt sense that all of our conversations are navigations through the waters of dignity and indignity. I am alert to whether the conversation feels like it is voluntary; that is, the patient is saying or doing what feels right to them to say or do, even if it puts us at odds. That sense of choiceful conversation respects a patient's sense of agency, which is a component of dignity. In these conversations we find our abilities to lead our lives together moment-by-moment, always with now-for next guiding us along (Ibid).

For me, this issue of dignity is relevant when we are working with isolated actions that we ask a patient to attend to, or do an experiment. In Gestalt therapy practice we often isolate a small experience and "play" with it. I know that for me, engaging during workshops in these small experiments offered without any felt sense that the facilitator understood the relationship between my current adaptation and what my life meant to me, was excruciating. Ultimately, I purposely chose a Gestalt therapist who was very sensitive to the contacting between us, as that increased the likelihood that I would not be thrust into indignity, at least not without the support of the therapist's sensitive awareness of the cost to me.

Another aspect of meaningfulness, is the idea of 'sense(s) of self.' When I reflect on my senses of myself, I am inevitably drawn to a vague, fluid sense of emergent-self-in-relation. My different relationships come to mind, also the contexts in which various 'soft-assembled' senses of myself are brought into play, including even some contexts in which the extremity of the situation overwhelmed my sense of self (the memories of which leave me with regret). We all have many senses of ourselves. Our sense of self at any given moment, in any given situation, is different from a sense of self at another moment, in another situation. It is always a "soft-assembly" a loose configuration that is open and emergent. However, in situations that are not extreme, we are likely to have a felt sense that while this particular sense of myself *is* specific to this time and place, I am also more than any one particular sense of self. What I mean by "more than" is that at any moment I am living a particular—perhaps habitual—sense of self, and in so doing, I am living that fact that as a human being, I am one who *has* a sense of self. Both are aspects of the ground that constitute any given figure, or moment of contacting. In essence here, I am speaking primarily of various roles we play: mother, teacher, therapist, patient, daughter, lover, tennis-player, etc.

Also, I am referring to our singular coloration, our means of living these roles, and the fact that I do inhabit a sense of self.

I am strongly aware that my sense of self is more open and fluid when I am in situations with others in which there are supports for my capacities, resources and vulnerabilities. In situations in which I do not sense welcome, I lose touch with my "best self" and instead draw on a more enfeebled sense of myself. In either case, as my absorption with my environment grows, be it with a person or something other-than-human, evokes the resources, the sense of self that is most relevant to that moment, without conscious attention on my part.

These shifting senses of ourselves are occurring for the patient and therapist during our sessions. We are resonating, responding, being disturbed bodily, emotionally, our thoughts can be crystal clear or confused. By paying attention to our shifting sense of self together, clarity about intention and directionality begins to emerge. It behooves the therapist to respect the dignity of this process of being lost together and finding our way together.

A concluding thought

Dignity, selfhood, the development of fluid and resilient senses of self; these are all supports for leading a life that is open to, and responsive to, new experience. And since we are all making/being made by each other continually, as therapists we have a significant contribution to offer. While we are being tossed about by waves of sensation and feeling, just as our patients are, we are called on to bring our "best selves" possible to the encounter. We cannot decide what to feel, what to think, but we can bring an intention to the encounter. This is part of what it means for us as therapists to lead our lives. We can intend what I have referred to elsewhere, as, a dialogic attitude (1989). It is an attitude we lose and re-find repeatedly in our work. When we lose it we can commit to re-finding it. That process in and of itself, occurring between patient and therapist, is often an element in supporting the patient's growing resilience and their capacity to meet otherness, and thereby lead a life.

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14.

Margherita SPAGNUOLO LOBB

Self as Contact, Contact as Self

A contribution to ground experience in gestalt therapy theory of self

1. Premise

I would like to thank Jean Marie for inviting me to voice my opinion in this Gestalt compendium on the self. I regard him as a Gestalt brother of mine. We have shared many growth experiences, first and foremost our training with Isadore From. We have discussed the fundamental concepts of theory and practice at length, especially during the GTin, a learning/teaching group created by him together with other seven expert psychotherapists from all over the world, including some of the authors of this book.

Our exchanges – often started by him – have always been the "growing edge" of the development of Gestalt theory and practice, for example, what indeed changes as an effect of psychotherapy? How can we talk about psychopathology in Gestalt therapy? What do we mean by "field"? How does contact differ from relationship? And so on. I have regarded these exchanges over the years as nourishment and ground for my own theories. My previous works on the theory of the self in Gestalt therapy (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2001a; 2001b; 2001c; 2005a; 2009; 2013a) are certainly the result of Isadore From's teachings, and of my scientific friendships with Daniel Stern, Vittorio Gallese, Donna Orange and others, but also of the often animated debate with Jean Marie and the colleagues from the "thinking communities" he was able to create. I would not

be able to conceive my previous work on the self without him and his ability to destructure figures and create new ones, thus embodying the hermeneutic method. The new challenge presented by this book seems to me the greatest ever – rethinking the idea of self, the very core of our approach. I, too, feel the obligation to... start over! We need to re-read and explain once more, in light of our times, our patients, our society and the new theories of psychology, how the sense of the self can be created according to our approach.

This book was a necessary step and it will be important nourishment, on the one hand for us authors, who will be able to benefit from one more exchange – and on the other hand for the Gestalt community, who will be able to identify with a live psychotherapy modality that is able to modernize itself.

2. The novelty: the self as the experience of the world

The Gestalt theory of the self still represents an important clinical innovation, and this is why it was never incorporated in the new, different movements that have taken shape throughout the years (from Mindfulness to the intersubjective and relational trends of contemporary psychoanalysis and to constructivism), which offer the advantage of addressing new clinical needs and modified social conditions while still being based on principles that are familiar to us. The Gestalt theory of the self - in other words the definition of how the sense of oneself (the process of identification) is built - is still new and radical even after six decades, and it is resilient in the evolution of the world of psychotherapy. It is necessary to adapt it to the times we are living in, which are very different from those in which the founders lived.

In accordance with its phenomenological origin, the sense of self is defined by Gestalt therapy as "experience of the world".

We become able to identify ourselves in the moment in which we experience the world. Experience here means the process, both active and passive at the same time (the middle mode), of creative adjustment (in other words, contact). The founders were not interested in understanding the existence of a sense of self outside of the contact with the world. The point of view here is that of the "between-in-action". For example, a patient might be diagnosed with a phobic/obsessive disorder, assessed with certain personality traits, his family immigrated from Eastern Europe when he was four, he had good school marks till the age of sixteen...and so on. However, what we are really interested in is *how* this patient makes contact with us during the therapy session, how – so to speak - he plays out his/her "here-and-now" with a particular therapist. In our view, that patient's self is his/her way of making contact with the therapist. It is self-determination in the contact with him/her starting from the background

of his/her previous contacts, from his/her physiology, and from the *id* of the situation (Robine, 2004). What is important for us is the process through which s/he makes contact, as if his/her entire self was concentrated there – all his/her wisdom, education, emotions and conflicts are only relevant to us when they become life practice, flesh and blood of his/her being-in-contact (Robine, 2003).

The founders do not underestimate the complexity of the therapeutic situation and of human relationships. The opposite is true: they try to grasp "the music" of complexity, the way in which different elements dance in the contact (with particular attention to the complex system of contacts between the human animal organism and its environment).

This is indeed a unique perspective on the self. *The self is contact*[1] (Perls *et al.*, 1994, p. 151).

To consider the self as contact implies the concept of *contact boundary*, and the related concept of *organism/environment field.*

«Contacting occurs at the surface-boundary in the field of the organism/environment. We say it in this odd way, rather than 'at the boundary between the organism and the environment', because the definition of an animal involves its environment: it is meaningless to define a breather without air, a walker without gravity and ground, an irascible person without obstacles, and so on for every animal function» (Perls *et al.*, 1994, p. 34).

Goodman says that the self is not part of the organism at all, but is a function of the field, it's *the way the field includes the organism*[2] (Perls *et al.*, 1994, p. 180). The theory of Gestalt therapy studies the "self as function" of the organism-environment field in contact, not as a structure or an instance (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2013a, p. 76), and this still represents a unique perspective among personality and psychotherapeutic theories (Brownell, in press).

As McLeod writes (1993, p. 26), «not the self contacts environment, but where there is contact there is self. Where there is no contact there is no self, where there is little contact there is little self, where there is full contact there is full self». It is a radical perspective, maybe ungraspable, like the foundation of a "psychology without a psyche", a challenge to apply in the psychological realm as Sartre said: "Existence precedes essence".

As founders of an existential therapy, Perls and Goodman «took seriously the irreducible unity of the sociocultural, animal and physical field in every concrete experience» (Perls *et al.*, 1994, p. 15) and were determined to redress the Cartesian split between self and external world, body and mind, etc. They

1. Italics mine.

2. Italics mine.

seem to validate the sense of the complexity and of the transitory nature of the self «The complex system of contacts necessary for adjustment in the difficult field, we call "self". Self may be regarded as the boundary of the organism, but the boundary is not itself isolated from the environment; it contacts the environment; it belongs to both, environment and organism. Contact is touch touching something. The self is not to be thought of as a fixed institution; it exists wherever and whenever there is in fact a boundary interaction» (Perls *et al.*, 1994, p. 151).

The self, the hinge on which all psychotherapeutic approaches are based, is conceived in *Gestalt Therapy* as the ability of the organism to make contact with its environment – spontaneously, deliberately and creatively (see Bloom, 2003). The function of the self is to contact the environment (in our terminology, the "how" of human nature) (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2013a, p. 76).

Therefore, the *field* expresses the unitary nature of the organism/environment reality (as well as the nature-culture, political-social one), while the *contact boundary* expresses the movement between them which leads to growth and individuation. These are not conceived as individual experiences but as a continuous process of being-with significant parts of the world, with excitement, determination and choices, destructuring and reconstructing, and finally assimilating.

The perception of this process is *subjective* of course, but the process itself is of the organism and of the environment as a whole. It is a process of transformation of the unitary nature of the self/world (in phenomenological terms), called "field". A consequence of this perspective is that the therapist sees the change in psychotherapy as a *unitary change* of both the client and him/her self. Their field changes, and not just the client's. The perception of the client and that of the therapist both change, and both these changes have to be taken into account. If during a session the therapist feels a pressure in his chest when the client speaks tearfully of an abuse she has experienced in her childhood, when the session ends, the field "tears-pressure" is changed, and the criteria for looking at the process has to include both perceptions, since the pressure felt by the therapist is part of a whole field. «It's meaningless to define a breather without air» (Perls *et al.*, 1994, p. 35) – just to imagine an example, the pressure felt by the therapist includes what is "unspoken" in the client's experience and also the undeveloped intentionality for contact of the situation. No one among the client's previous contacts has expressed the pain and wish to rebel against the abusive relationship that the pressure implies.

We are referring to a concept of the phenomenological, hence experiential field, which, as already said, is not a merely subjective reality. The field perspective allows us to think of perception as a "relational product" strictly connected to the fullness of the *concentration* of the individuals involved at the

contact boundary. In this way they are able to grasp both what is internal and what is external – as a unique situation animated by interacting forces. What is specific to our theory is that the self is considered in a *medial position* between organism and environment, and hence in a strictly relational position[3] (...) The concept of field in Gestalt therapy is the way in which our founders solved the divide between subjective and objective, in that *full subjectivity coincides with full presence in objectivity*. The more the individual is fully present in the "between", the more s/he takes part in the field, the more her/his presence contributes to creating the conditions of the field. But the more introverted s/he is, taken up by the intrapsychic process and hence distracted from the contact boundary, the less s/he participates in the conditions of the field and in their creation. Only with full presence at the contact boundary is it possible, for the Gestalt therapist, to solve the concrete problems of human relationships (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2013a, pp. 75-76).

To be in line with the experiential choice of the founders, Paul Goodman, thanks to his literary ability, was able to deliver a book written in what they called a "contextual" method and they said that the book was conceived to dissolve the chief neurotic dichotomies (body and mind, self and outside world, emotional and real, childish and mature, biological and cultural, poetry and prose, spontaneous and deliberate; personal and social, love and aggressiveness, unconscious and conscious) (Perls *et al.*, 1994, p. 20). The aim of that book was therefore to create an experiment for the reader while s/he reads, with a view to helping the reader to experience how these terms are not dichotomies, but parts of a figure/ground structure.

And this is another unique concept about self in Gestalt therapy – the self is conceived as a continuos process of *figure/ground formation*. At any moment, its functioning is given by the balance between the ground experience and the possiblities (in the field) to create a figure more or less vivid and clear (Bloom, 2003). Both experiences, of figure and ground, are not individual ones, they are co-created in the organism/environment field.

«The self is not to be thought of as a fixed institution; it exists wherever and whenever there is in fact a boundary interaction» (Perls *et al.*, 1994, p. 151). This challenge of considering the transitory and spontaneous nature of self is particularly appropriate today, in our current society, where freedom from "institutionalized realities" has been finally realized, and we need clinical tools to support the intentionalities of contact which are implied in every human behaviour (see Spagnuolo Lobb, 2013a, p. 24-29). In a world where there are

3. See Cavaleri (2003), Parlett (2003), Jacobs (1995) and Yontef (1993) for an in-depth examination of the perspective of the phenomenological field.

no containing primary relationships, no certainties of societal capacity to host individual contributions, no certainty of having a home, an earth, a partner, friends, life-long jobs, helping professionals are tempted to rely on fixed remedies (drugs for relational sufferings like depression, panic attacks, and so on, behaviour training for psychosis or authism, etc.). Gestalt therapy can provide remedies which include the support for contact making among each other, which is the human resiliency of our time.

Now, this radical and challenging glance on the self of our founders, based on the here and now of organism and environment contacting each other, has been over the years a difficult matter to apply. Perls himself, in *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim*, his best theoretical development after New York, had to use the concept of the five layers of neurosis to explain the Gestalt ideas to the large audiences he attracted in his final years (McLeod, 1993, p. 28), and these explanations of the therapeutic process seemed to contradict the idea of self as contact. He probably tried to explain what he did, and also tried to give a name to the complexity of the clinical situation. Other contributions in the first twenty years after the foundation of GT, like Latner's (1973), Polster M., Polster E. (1973), Yontef (1993), Tobin (1983), have tried to give a theoretical shape to the "magic" of Gestalt therapy work, basically trying to give a ground to the unclear theoretical frame that the quick resolution of the founding book had left and to the (sometimes embarassing) stress that Perls had put in his later years in California on the need to be rid of theoretical burdens.

From the 90s on, the need to train new generations of students (deriving from a trend to validate psychotherapeutic approaches for legal and insurances reasons, especially widespread in Europe) highlighted the need to have a clear theory of self which could dialogue with other approaches. Moreover, the changed social situation with more seriously disturbed clients (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2005b), and the relational turn that all approaches (first of all psychoanalysis) went through, supported by results from neurosciences, brought many of us to dialogue and reflect on a possible development and better description of our theory of self.

3. Crucial aspects of Gestalt therapy theory of self

In their strategic perspective, the founders were very critical towards the dicothomic culture that separated self from the world, conscious from unconsciuos, health from pathological, etc. So they made a choice, namely to focus only on the boundary of the therapeutic contact, since we cannot see what is inside, we can only witness what is happening now between therapist and client (the phenomenology of the situation).

As Georges Wollants (2008) has extensively described, it is a clearly situated position – they were interested in the *momentary exchange between organism and environment*, in particular in the therapeutic setting.

In practise, if the client brings a dream to the therapist, for instance, the therapist does not try to understand the meaning of the dream itself for the client, but tries to understand the *intentionality* and *how* the client is *telling* him/her that dream[4]. It is the process of contacting that is important for us, that is *the telling of the dream*, not the dream in itself.

"Contact is *touch touching something*[5]. The self is not to be thought of as a fixed institution. It exists wherever and whenever there is in fact a boundary interaction" (Perls *et al.*, 1994, p. 151). It seems that in the "little drop" of existence-in-action of the client we can see and work with her/his whole therapeutic functioning and need.

The self is described as a particular experience of self, namely the situation of contact-making and withdrawal. Let us say that a person deeply reflects in the middle of the night, alone, on an important relationship that is in crisis, and in that moment, imagining the other person and remembering certain facts, s/he understands suddenly something of that relationship, some novelty about it can be assimilated now. Is this contact, is this self?

According to our founders, it should not be self, or at least this is not the kind of self that we should be interested in. It could be considered as fore-contact with that person, for instance, since there is not the real "touch touching something". There is self everytime there is a "boundary interaction" between an organism and a part of the environment. To touch or smell the bole of a tree and sense a novelty is contact. To swim and enjoy the pressure and freshness of the water, experiencing some difference, is contact. But to reflect on a past experience or dream is not contact, even if these activities might include an insight, a change in perception. This is the radical sense of self as contact brought in the text by Perls, Hefferline and Goodman (1951).

Animated by a sense of reality, typical of American pragmatism (Kitzler, 2007), wishing to overcome the rigidity imposed by the academic theoretical tendency to abstract general principles from reality, in line with the anti-institutional flow of the culture at that time, and tired of the egotistic results of psychoanalitic treatments, they wanted to create a theory of self which was not detached from reality, which was able to grasp the spontaneity of life and could be of practical use to psychotherapists.

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4. I realize that there are different positions among Gestalt therapists on how to work with dreams. I am referring to Isadore From's position, which is a radical one, very much coherent with the self as contact.

5. Italics mine.

Therefore the self is contact, real contacting between organism and environment, this is the "sense of self", not when one reflects on oneself.

Now, this is the most remarkable and at the same time difficult point for our theory of self.

If we consider the self as a separate entity, and therefore create "an object" of study, we split the spontaneity of nature. Every split, every dichotomy creates a misunderstanding about human nature, supports an egotistic point of view ("I know much about this human being")[6] and makes it impossible to support the unitary and spontaneous nature of human interaction with the environment.

When a human being is engaged in contact-making with his/her environment that moment includes all her/his capacity and mode of being in the world. In that moment there is not only the individual self but much more – the self which is engaging in contact making, it is a spontaneous and holistic self-in-contact. All that we know from individualistic psychological theories, both psychodynamic and cognitive or behavioural (or even Gestalt psychology) may become one ground knowledge for the therapist of this self-in-contact, which is in movement. Neurosciences, epigenetics, development of primary relationships, all the sciences which study how structures are combined in the process of change (see Yontef, 1993; Wheeler, 2000; Vázquez Bandin, 2010; 2014, pp. 46-66; Spagnuolo Lobb, 2013d) are an important ground knowledge for us. Then we let a figure emerge from this ground knowledge, to apply what we know about the client and what we know about ourselves and about the actual situation in the therapeutic "tension" of the moment, supporting the client's intentionality of contact, the *now-for-next* of the situation. This is our art.

In this way, choosing to look at how the self creatively adjusts to its environment in the moment of contact, our founders resolved their determination to create a theory which grasps the spontaneity of the client-in-session. They also resolved the problem of looking at the human being in its movement in the world – the crucial sense of self is not what the person feels and thinks, but (given what s/he feels and thinks) the way s/he *determines* to be and move in the world (the process, the function/capacity and the aesthetics, the music of being in contact), animated by an intentionality for contact.

Let us take an example – a client tells the therapist of the ambivalence she has experienced towards her elder sister, who was better appreciated by the adults in her original family. The Gestalt therapist looks at how she determines to be in contact with her, a specific therapist, in a specific space and time (the "touch touching"), given the client's past situation, and her actual wish to change. The focus is on the way she and the therapist modulate each other, choosing certain aspects and rejecting others, we look at the "music" they are starting to play

6. For the concept of Egotism see Spagnuolo Lobb, 2013a, pp. 88-91.

together, here and now, where the theme of the music is to support the client to do better what she does well (the creative adjustment in a difficult situation animated by an intentionality for contact).[7]

To summarize, the self in Gestalt therapy is:

- The movement of the organism/environment field as a whole
- A co-created figure/ground formation
- The process of making contact and withdrawal (the *how* of contact making)
- A function: the ongoing capacity to adjust creatively to the environment
- The expression of the spontaneity of life
- The expression of how the past (both unfinished and assimilated contacts) leans into the *now-for-next*
- Self is contact. *Contact is the world as given in my experience at any moment* (Perls *et al.*, 1994, p. 46)
- *Contact (alias self) is my experience of the world*, and if I cannot experience the world, I have neither world nor self
- The crucial implication of the equation of self with contact is that organism and environment are always a whole in movement.

4. Self as figure/ground formation

Self is an ongoing process of the creation and destruction of figure/ground formation. This concept replaces the idea of an unconsciuos and a conscious state, the split between what I know of myself and what I do not know, but it is there triggering the (especially irrational) behaviours of mine. The ground experience, in Gestalt therapy, works as a support for the creation of perceptual figures, and is in its turn influenced by figure experiences. Polster E., Polster M. (1973, p. 30) define the ground as a phenomenological condition which «provides a context which affords depth for the perception of the figure». For Melnick and Nevis (1997, p. 98) «the ground consists of traces of experience, history and physiology (...)». Based on these two definitions, I consider the ground as *the acquired feeling of the body and of social roles*, it is the given situation in which the ego can deliberate on what to identify with and what to alienate from.

The ground animates the formation and efficacy of figures. An important point here is to consider both the ground and the figure as co-created experiences. «Note that the energy for the figure-formation comes from both poles of the field, both the organism and the environment» (Perls *et al.*, 1994, p. 182).

7. For a detailed clinical description of this process in a session, see Spagnuolo Lobb (2003).

The self is contact for Gestalt therapy, and the process of figure/ground formation belongs to contact. When we determine ourselves in contacting the environment and then develop ourselves in contact making and withdrawal every moment of this process is a figure/ground process that arises from the contact. The "touch touching something" is supported by the experience of the ground – how previous contacts, developed abilities, physiological needs, social definition of oneself find their place in the ground condition of the self-in-contact. And the figure formation of course arises from the continuous attunement of organism and environment. This process is visible in the mother/child interaction, where, as described by Stern et al. (2003), there are continuous derailments and reparing interactions. The more the organisms in contact are focussed and alive at the contact boundary, the more this process is flexible and self regulating.

This perspective allows us to describe both the natural spontaneous process of contacting, and the suffering contacting (psychopathology), as well as the experience of the ground which comes from previous contacts (developmental issues).[8]

While the unfolding of self in contact has been well described in Perls *et al.* (1951), psychopathology and development have been a necessary follow up on the original theory of Gestalt therapy. As a matter of fact, the basic concept of self as contact and as figure/ground formation gives us enough ground to build a coherent perspective on psychopathology and on development.

I will briefly recall the three functions of the figure/ground formation and the emergence of self in the time of contact-withdrawal. Then I will approach developmental aspects of the experience of the ground, proposing the idea of the *polyphonic development of domains* (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2012). Finally, I will describe how to focus on the ground experience as a Gestalt diagnostic tool for different suffering contacts.

4.1. The Three Functions of the Self as figure/ground formation[9]

Having defined the self as the complex system of contacts necessary for adjustment in a difficult field, the authors of *Gestalt Therapy* identify certain "partial structures" which the self creates "for special purposes" (Perls, Hefferline and Goodman, 1994, pp. 156-157). These structures are clusters of experiences around which specific aspects of the self are organized. They are described as partial capabilities of integrated functioning in the holistic

8. As Yontef (1983, p. 336) says, the past is a background of the present.

9. See Spagnuolo Lobb (2013a, pp. 77-81) for a more detailed description of these three functions of the self.

context of the experience that constitutes the self. Id, ego and personality functions are just three of the many possible experiential structures - they are understood as examples of the person's capacity to relate to the world. Isadore From used to teach these three functions considering the id- and personality-functions as two grounds of the experience of contact and the ego-function as a figure experience.

The *id-function* is defined as the organism's capacity to make contact with the environment by means of: a) the sensory-motor background of assimilated contacts; b) physiological needs; and c) bodily experiences and those sensations that are perceived "as if inside the skin" (including past open situations) (Perls, Hefferline and Goodman, 1994, pp. 156-157). «The *Personality* is the system of attitudes assumed in interpersonal relations (...) is essentially a verbal replica of the self» (Perls, Hefferline and Goodman, 1994, p. 160). Thus, the personality function is expressed by the subject's answer to the question "Who am I?"

The *ego-function* works on the basis of the information coming from all the other structures of the self, expresses the ability to spontaneously deliberate and is exercised in harmony with the ability to contact the environment through what is perceived as if "inside the skin" (*id-function*) and through the definition given to the question "who am I?" (*personality-function*).

Our founders state that this unitary and creative concept of self is an attempt to solve the weakness in the concept of ego in Freudian theory. «In the literature of psychoanalysis, notoriously the weakest chapter is the theory of the self or the ego. In this book, proceeding by not nullifying but by affirming the powerful work of creative adjustment, we essay a new theory of the self and the ego» (Perls, Hefferline and Goodman, 1994, p. 24).

4.2. The figure/ground formation at the time of contact-withdrawal

The experience of contact is described in Gestalt Therapy as the evolving of four phases (fore-contact, contact, final contact, post-contact), each with a different stress on the figure/background dynamic, which is always a co-created experience of both the organism and the environment (Perls *et al.*, 1994, p. 182 ff.). Each phase develops a particular intentionality of contact and contributes to the unfolding of self in contact-making and withdrawal.[10]

10. See Spagnuolo Lobb, 2013a, p. 92 ff., for a detailed description of each phase in clinical examples.

5. The importance of the feeling of the ground in the present society

Today, in actual society, we need to focus and develop better tools to understand and work on the experience of the ground, as part of the whole Gestalt of the self. The experience of contact, the self namely, is always unified, this remains a clear value for us. However, if decades ago, in the narcissistic society, it was obvious for humanistic psychotherapists to focus on the figure ("How can I get rid of an uncomfortable situation?" "What is my responsibility in this discomfort?"), today it is obvious to focus on the ground ("I don't feel myself enough to take a decision in a difficult situation"). As Wheeler (1998, p. 86) pointed out, the practice of Gestalt therapy was initially too figure bound, depicting human life as impulsive, episodic, socially isolated. Underlining the importance of the ground, Wheeler provided a framework for shifting emphasis from an individualistic to a relational (or contact boundary) paradigm (Macaluso, 2014).

In fact, while supporting the figure is a way of responding to the need to be autonomous and free from social impositions, supporting the ground means to consider the systemic condition, the situation in its complexity, the environmental, social and interpersonal conditions which create the supporting "net" for contact. What our clients need today is to be supported in their ground experience.

As described above, the lack of containment in primary relationships and the uncertainty which caracterizes daily life, have created a crucial change in people's way of life. Our clients are no longer in pain from the incapacity to separate from important relationships (problem of personality function: who am I in this relationship?) but are unsure of what and who they are, what they want, if it is worthwhile to live since they do not know whether they will be alive tomorrow (the embodied sense of safety is damaged). There is a new existential condition among new generations – they need to know whether they will continue to live tomorrow, whether they will be beheaded or will be able to keep their head in place, for reasons beyond their control. There is an existential fear of not being in control of one's own contact with the environment. In some way, the id-functioning is more in danger.

Following this evidence, I've radically changed the way I see and use the theory of self in Gestalt therapy. I'm more interested in supporting the experience of the ground than the freedom to create new figures. The two grounds for the experience of self are the id-functioning and the personality-functioning.

Developmental aspects, in terms of how they influence perception of the contact boundary now, are a basic experience of the ground: they relate, as a unitary gestalt, both to id-functioning and to personality-functioning; they are habitual patterns of contact that the person has learned and created in previous contacts.

5.1. Developmental aspects of the exeperience of the ground[11]

The here-and-now experienced by the client is a creative *Gestalt* that summarizes the bodily and socially relational schemas assimilated in the preceding contacts (the being-with through the body – *id-function* - and through the social definition – *personality-function* - of the self) and the intentionalities (the excitement for contact) that support the present contact that the client makes with the therapist (*ego-function of the self*).

I propose the concept of *polyphonic development of domains* (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2012) as a suitable way of looking at the client's development in the here-and-now of the session, in order to support the excitement for contact which has lost its spontaneity in development. I have taken as an example of domains the different modalities of contact that Perls *et al.* (1994, pp. 209 ff.) define as "losses of ego functions". In line with the phenomenological perspective, they can be seen as possible modes of contact in a dimensional way, ranging from spontaneous to anxious modes. Of course, we might consider other domains, and as a matter of fact there are – in my opinion - other valuable examples, like those described by Frank (2001), Parlett (2003) or other colleagues.[12]

It is above all a question of seeing the ground experience and the assimilated contacts from a positive anthropology, in which the creative adjustment to difficult situations is the lens through which to look at the client's symptoms, as well as her/his therapeutic resources. What is helpful to us is not seeing *whether* clients have reached certain developmental goals, but *how* they have fulfilled the intentionality of contact adjusting creatively to difficult situations[13]. We consider as "given" situation the background of the client's developmental experience (diachronic level) and the present malaise and the intentionality for contact which s/he seeks to bring to completion (synchronic level) as the figure. We need to observe how the resources of our clients have kept their freshness or have become dormant.

As a matter of fact, the challenge for this approach remains, even today, that of using theoretical references that start from *the experience* of the client *and* of

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11. See Spagnuolo Lobb (2012; 2013a) for a more detailed description of developmental perspective in Gestalt therapy.

12. The most significant studies on the development and developmental theory in Gestalt therapy are those by Oaklander (1978); Wheeler and McConville (2002) have pointed out a general idea on development in Gestalt therapy; Smith (1985), Kepner (1993), Clemmens (2011) and especially Frank (2001) consider the role of bodily processes within the therapy session. Each of these approaches, in my opinion, complements the other.

13. *Mutual synchronization*, already pointed out by the models of precocious interactive regulation, from Winnicott (1974) to Odgen (1989), to Fogel (1993) and Beebe *et al.* (1992), is an important criterion of observation for us.

the therapist in the here-and-now of the therapeutic situation. This brings us to use the peculiar esthetic knowledge.

I will look at the concept of domains first and then at the esthetic modality to use them.

In line with the theory of complexity (Maturana,Varela, 1992), the concept of domains (initially used by Gardner, 1985) overcomes the more rigid idea of stages.[14] While the stages are cumulative, so that each presupposes the competences of the preceding one, the concept of domain is linked to clearly differentiated competences, which have their own development in the whole course of life, and which mutually interact giving rise to the harmony (we might say to the Gestalt) of the person's present competence. The domains are modalities of contact of which the child is capable and which continue to be developed throughout life (see Figure 1). They are «active expressions of vitality» (Perls *et al.*, 1994, p. 25). Our founders state that «in the defensive characteristic, there is always a beautiful affirmative childlike feeling» (Perls *et al.*, 1994, p. 62) and, in the eyes of the therapist, «the native expressions and their neurotic employment now form a whole-figure, for they are the work of the client's ongoing self-regulation» (*ibidem*, p. 62).

We can see development as a journey towards the complexity of contacts, rather than as a progression from less mature to more mature stages (which would bring us back to an individualistic perspective). The clinical task is to observe, not the maturity of development of a person, but *how* that person deals with the complexity of her/his perceptions in a field.

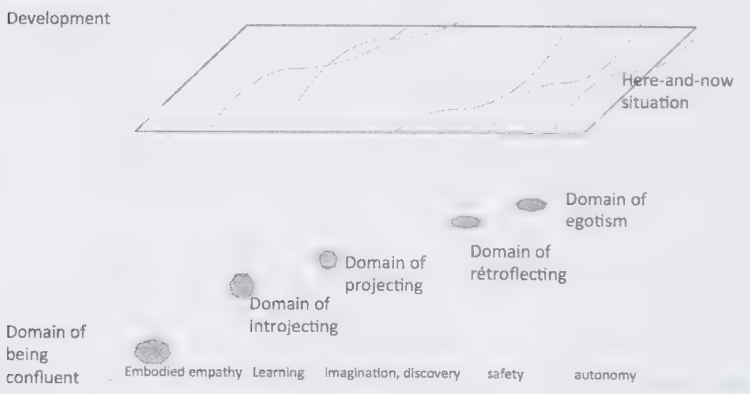

Figure 1 – Gestalt map of the polyphonic development of the domains (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2012, p. 233).

14. The domain is an area of processes and competencies by which the various functions – related to various developmental areas – mutually integrate.

Development happens in a phenomenological or situational field and the acquisitions deriving from it are like experiential codes that each person inserts in her/his way of being-with in the here-and-now. The self-regulation always regards a *situational field of contacts*, which "appears in the occasion of the therapeutic situation" (Robine, 2004; 2015).

Let us now approach the esthetic modality to use this developmental perspective in psychotherapy.

In contemporary psychopathology[15] behavior is seen as located on a continuum which goes from normality to severity. Applying this dimensional perspective to the experience of contact, we might say that every domain can range from spontaneity to blocked/fixed excitement.

A blocked contact process always implies a reduction or loss of sensitivity, of being fully present to one's own senses, and hence the reduced ability to tune in to the other. Paraphrasing Stern's "implicit relational knowledge", I call "esthetic relational knowledge" the way the Gestalt therapist uses his/her own senses to understand the client's situation (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2015).

For instance, an 18-month-old child "resolves" an obvious tension between his parents by leading them to sing: he becomes an orchestral conductor, harmonizing the energies of the field which had been in conflict. Though playing a role which was not his (taking care of the tension between his parents) this child has brought onto the scene a delightful harmony in which they were all in tune with one another. In terms of developmental theories, this behavior on the part of the child is "atypical" and not appropriate to his growth – it cannot be regarded as "healthy" or "typical" that a child act as therapist for his parents. For Gestalt therapy, this behavior is appropriate and creative, in that it allows the child not only to fulfil his intentionality for contact towards his parents (he reaches them, he is successful with them), but also to find a solution in which everyone feels better (his parents are happy and moved, they see the beauty of their son's gesture). Obviously the solution adopted by the child does not solve all the problems between the parents, nor will it remain the sole, rigid response to situations of tension, but it solves the problem that arose at that moment in the phenomenological field, and this gives the child an important confirmation for his growth. To the degree to which the people involved (parents and also other witnesses) are sensitive and succeed in seeing the child's attempt to creatively solve a problem, the child will feel recognized, will be able to close the *Gestalt* (will not develop unfinished business in this respect) and will be free in future to make different decisions. But if the behavior should become repetitive, it would be a sign

15. See the criticism of DSM categorical diagnosis and the need for a dimensional perspective (Francesetti, Gecele, 2009).

of desensitization – the child would carry it out without the freshness of the spontaneous contact, and it is this that would create the problem, not the behavior in itself.

How that ability to "direct the orchestra" is now (in the therapeutic relationship as an adult, for instance) a collapsed or resilient modality of contact and what physiological supports (breathing, control of the diaphragm, etc.) does he still experience? This is a way of considering the ground experience by which that client is present in the contact with the therapist.

The criterion for the suitability of the solution adopted by the child (and now by the adult client) is aesthetic, intrinsic above all to the bodily experience. It is the luminous body of the child and the bodies of the parents activated by a pleasant surprise, and the wonder and surprise that we feel when we look at the scene, that constitute our diagnostic criterion, not pre-established criteria external to the experience.

In the attempt to integrate the esthetic relational knowledge with the concept of domains, let us consider now the spontaneity that is *always* present in the polyphonic presence of domains (actually what we aim to recognize and support in our role as psychotherapists) and the possible "risk" which is implied in every domain when the contact-boundary is desensitized (Figure 2).

Each domain includes the capacity for being fully present at the contact boundary, perceiving the self and the other in a differentiated, sensitive manner, *with the courage of staying with the uncertainty of the situation of contact*. The person is at the boundary with the ability to adjust creatively to the other's move and to one's own move, hence containing the uncertainty (one never knows what the other person's next move will be, nor what his/her own will be) and continually finding a creative solution that carries forward both one's own being and the other's (see Staemmler, 2006).

While I suggest a reading of the detailed description of the various domains in Spagnuolo Lobb (2012; 2013a, p. 109) I summarize in figure 2 the *excitement*, the *life ability*, and the *risks* in the case of a desensitized contact boundary.

The Gestalt therapist not only observes these patterns but also tries to intuit the *now-for-next* (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2013a.), the intentionality concealed in the client's habitual, desensitized pattern of contact, via an aesthetic relational knowledge. If "the self is the artist of life" (Perls *et al.*, 1951), one of the main competences of the Gestalt therapist is to recognize how the client has made a masterpiece of his/her life.

Domain	Excitement for contact	Life ability	Risk in contacting the other
Being confluent	Being part of the environment	Embodied empathy	Confusion Madness
Introjecting	Giving names	Learning	Depression
Projecting	Plunge into the world	Imagination, discovery, courage	Paranoiac experience
Retroflecting	To be well confined in oneself	Safety Well-informed	Solitude Grandiosity
Egotism	The pleasure and pride in being oneself	Autonomy Finding a strategy in a difficult situation	Control, boredom, void

Figure 2 – Excitements, life abilities and risks of each domain.

6. The experience of the ground and the suffering of the between

Having considered the ground experience of the self that comes from the polyphonic development of domains of contact, let us now look at the different "musics", different combinations of domains as ground experiences and determinations of the self-function, which create particular kinds of figure/ground formation.

How does the experience of self-in-contact take shape? If the self is a continuous co-created figure/ground formation, we can think of different kinds of Gestalten of the self-in-contact.

Domains do not include ego functioning. They are not about determination, they are about acquired contacts and contact modes. For example, they can inform us on how the client habitually introjects when s/he is in contact with the therapist. Does her/his introjecting carry an anxiety or, is it functional to avoid it? Does s/he introject in a spontaneous way? Is her/his introjecting used to avoid an excitement not supported by oxygen (the client easily nods listening to what the therapist says, for instance) or is it used to learn and move better in

the therapeutic field (the client uses the "language" of the therapist creatively and with lightness)?

All the habitual modes of contact "shape" the music the client plays with the therapist and the music they play together.

On that ground, via the ego-functioning, the self determines how to make contact with that particular therapist, in that particular moment and space, creatively adjusting to the situation and always co-creating the figure with the environment, working with more or less attunement (depending on the degree of anxiety and desensitization at the contact boundary). The experience of contact unfolds in the various phases (fore-contacting, contacting, full contacting, post-contacting, see section 4.2) in a figure/ground balance which can be more or less spontaneous and flexible.

In order for the figure to emerge with clarity and a distinct shape, the ground of the experience has to be relaxed. This is the "normal" condition, when the energy perceived at the contact boundary is clear and manageable. The ground experience is serene, flexible, full of resources. The more the ground of domains is calm, which means full of sufficient closed Gestalten, versus too many unfinished business, the more the self can concentrate and be spontaneous at the contact boundary. Domains which have been acquired with anxiety, because experiences could not be closed (for instance, when the child called for their mother, sometimes she came other times she did not, and the child did not know why), create a ground full of anxiety, where the ego-function cannot deliberate easily. Unfinished Gestalten create an anxious experience of the ground, which at a psychological level is experienced as unsupported excitement, at a physiological level is the inability to release muscles in exhaling, at the contact boundary level is an interruption of contact flow (see Philippson, 2001).

Based on Kernberg (see Clarkin *et al.*, 2000, p. 5 ff.), I will consider three kinds of perception at the contact boundary – neurotic, borderline and psychotic. Furthermore, in accordance with my clinical experience in recent years, I will include the post traumatic perception, which seems to be widespread following recent social change. Therefore, I see the suffering of the between based on four kinds of anxious ground experience, as possible examples of figure/ground formation for our clinical practice – the neurotic, the psychotic, the borderline perceptions, and the perceptions connected with post traumatic experiences, which I divide into abusive and disruptive traumatic experiences.

I will now briefly approach the experience of self in each one of these four given co-created ground conditions, considering the functioning of self at the contact boundary, the emergence of a co-created figure, the feeling in the therapeutic field. I hope that this will orient our clinical observation and will be useful also for diagnostic purposes (see Roubal, Gecele, Francesetti, 2013) and therapeutic attunement.

6.1. The ground experience in neurotic perception

Normality is when the environment is perceived as a good ground to rely on, the ground experience of the self includes bodily flexibility and readiness to react in a grounded way, and there is clear assimilation of personal social roles and attitudes.

In neurosis, the ground is sufficiently clear about who feels what and provides a basic existential safety. This normal condition can be experienced in a continuum which ranges from a less anxious to a more anxious perception. It can include general anxiety and panic disturbances, phobia, dissociations, psychosomatic disturbances, neurotic obsessive-compulsive suffering, where one tries to cope with anxiety via thought control and action, etc.

The pause when control is released, when one lets oneself go to the other or to the environment, is limited, some spontaneity is lost, the other (or the environment) cannot be reached with a good balance between active and passive presence (the middle mode which our founders indicated as the "normal" functioning of the self between organism and environment). Since the contact boundary is partly desensitized as an effect of anxiety, the ego-function cannot deliberate in the fullness of senses - the other is not seen clearly and some figures can be predominant and not "in contact".

The field is experienced as reliable and clear, although with painful contents.

6.2. The ground experience in psychotic perception

The ground is so full of anxiety that it is difficult to see who feels what (anxiety is the main figure and nothing else is visible) and to rely on some feeling of safety. The *ego function cannot deliberate* on this ground because there is no sense of separation of the organism from the environment.When the experience of the ground is structured with the feeling of a serious threat in the atmosphere (see Francesetti, Spagnuolo Lobb, 2013b), like the anxiety generated in a family by a psychotic parent, or any other source of widespread anxiety perceived as out of control, in the air, not knowing exactly whether it belongs to the outside or to the inside, the whole self *is* the experience of being in danger and of activating of emergency functions. One feels that s/he cannot relax the body while exhaling, therefore s/he cannot get the sense of self that comes from the silence of the pause, when there is no deliberateness and the self diminishes to allow the assimilation of novelty. It is not possibile to feel one's own body and find a definition of oneself (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2015). Contact is psychotic - there is no perception of the contact boundary, there is not a distinct self and a distinct environment, one cannot feel oneself-in-contact, therefore either s/he has to control (paranoiac) or s/he has to suspend (depression, see Francesetti, 2015)

or force contact making (severe narcissism or schizophrenia) and the excitement connected to it. What might seem a determination of the ego-functioning (a figure), in fact is an awkward reaction to the ground experience. "I have to control the fire that might burn my home" when there is no fire around, is not a clear figure emerging from the ground experience, it is a whole reaction to the fear of not being able to control the fire. The "I" is in the "fire", it is not a separated possibility.

The environment is full of anxiety and the organism responds to too many excitements getting lost in an ocean of stimuli. There is no containment of relational anxiety (for instance, the child is left alone with his/her feelings and sensations, not a hug which can contain the body nor words to contain the definition of oneself; if there is a physical disease, like a fever, nobody comforts the body of the child and nobody tells him/her that that bad sensation will go away in a while). Everybody is in danger in the environment, there is no perceived possibility in the field of stopping or calming the anxiety.

6.3. The ground experience in borderline perception [16]

The ground is made of unintegrated contact experiences, where the other (or the self) is perceived with polar and unintegrated qualities (sometimes from a genetic predisposition to a certain style of perception). For instance, the client accuses the therapist of not being empathic two years ago, and she does this after a recent positive and warm moment. The experience of warmth is nullified by the opposite experience, since the two cannot be integrated the one annihilates the other. The ego-function can deliberate but in a conflictual and ambivalent way. The figure is the wish to deliberate but the ground is ambivalent, in the case of borderline suffering the ground experience is confused from an inability to allow the excitement for contact to develop into the experience of a clearly separated I and you. The responsibility and the ownership of emotions and actions is not clear: "Am I angry at my mother or is she angry at me?" "Am I victim or persecutor?" However the main aspect of the subjective perception is not the confusion but the wish not to be confused, the wish to reach the other with a differentiated and integrated sense of self. The ground is not supportive enough of this wish, so there is a polar experience of a strong desire to be "normal, like other people" and a muddy feeling of not being clear, maybe bad, heavy and angry. Sometimes abusive relational experiences contribute to the confusion of the ground experience of borderline suffering.

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16. See Spagnuolo Lobb (2013b) for a detailed description of borderline suffering and a comparison between the DSM 5 criteria and the experience of the self-in-contact of both the therapist and the client.

The ground experience is unstable and polarized, the ego function aims to gain an integrated self.[17]

A typical feeling in the therapeutic field (not the only one, of course) is of an unreliable contact process. The client can never be sure that the therapist is good or bad, the therapist can never be sure that the client's (good or bad) experience will last.

6.4. The ground experience in post-traumatic perception

Post-traumatic suffering is becoming increasingly evident in our clinical work (Taylor, 2014). Trauma is unfortunately a common experience, connected with the weakness of the environment to contain excitement in early relationships (with consequences even in the physiology of contact making, with frequent experiences of anxiety), to provide clear differentiation of roles, to offer certainty in socio-psychological aspects (like jobs, safety, institutions).

The ground, previously perceived as sure, is now experienced as collapsing, for traumatic reasons. Traumatic experiences are of various kinds and can be referred to in subtle aspects of relationships as well as to a great change in the life of the person. The perception is a break in the previous equilibrium between figure and ground. Something previously given as sure is no longer sure, the ground collapses, the figure becomes rigid and cannot be integrated into the ground. The self activates certain sub-active functions, to protect the organism from unbearable stimuli (Cascio, 2012). The ego-function is no longer in control of the ability to adjust creatively. The organism reacts with hyper or hypo arousal, which are primarily brain reactions. The self as contact is the experience of a split figure and a split ground, not co-created.

Today we cannot avoid a reflection on the new clinical competences required in post-traumatic relational sufferings. To understand the ground experience in post-traumatic perception, knowledge of the neuro-physiology of trauma, and of the enduring effects that are beyond the voluntary control of the client is needed. The ground experience includes incredible adjustments that are made for the sake of survival under threat – the fear circuits of the brain and the sub-active functions that protect the self from unbearable stimuli (Taylor, 2014; Cascio, 2012).

I agree with Taylor (2014, p. 44) that trauma radically changes the ground experience from which the figures arise. It is the quality and the content of the ground that define the problem. In my clinical experience post-traumatic suffering varies. There are two main kinds of post-traumatic experiences, those

17. Isadore From used to say that the borderline client tries to save the draft of self which s/he has exhaustively conquered (see Spagnuolo Lobb, 2013b).

where the trauma is connected with some unclear and important relationship, with egodistonic but also positive stimuli, as in the case of abusive relationships, and those where the trauma is an unexpected loss. In fact, the breakdown of the ground can be experienced in the case of a close relationship (abusive relational trauma), or in the case of a sudden loss (a war, an accident, the loss of a dear person, a cancer, the surgical removal of an internal organ from one's own body).

If we consider figure/ground formation as a co-created process between organism and environment, the kind of trauma makes a relevant difference in the experience of the self. In the first case (abuse) the self tries to avoid the confusion in contact making with the other, in the second (loss of ground condition) the self tries to avoid the new situations. In both cases dissociations are the clinical evidence, but the experience of the co-created figure and ground is quite different.

6.4.1. The ground experience in the abusive post-traumatic perception

When the self is exposed to an unclear, confused, prolonged and egodistonic stimulus, like in the case of abuse, or sexual harassment, or vexation, its functions activate themselves to avoid an egodistonic determination ("What is happening is not clear – attracting and rejecting at the same time - and it's not my choice, but I have to save the needed relationship and cannot say no"). Dissociaton is often the result (Spagnuolo Lobb, Rubino, 2015), the self continues to exist on "another level", where there is not that traumatic situation, and there can be two selves which function at the same time (Nijenhuis, 2014). The body is desensitized and the self protects itself with derealization or depersonalization (in order to keep integrity). What is avoided is the suffering balance between a confused ground and an ambivalent figure. The seductive and/or imposing environment suffocates the ego-functioning. The ground experience is full of mixed feelings and confusion about roles and moral aspects, this confusion does not permit regular breathing. The figure becomes fixed (one thinks always of the traumatic episode) or anesthesized, and the ground is collapsed (nothing is sure anymore) and cannot integrate the episode(s) and allow another figure to appear.

The therapeutic field is characterized by a sort of superficial polite climate – everything has to remain under control and not openly said.

6.4.2. The ground experience in the post-traumatic perception of an unexpected loss

When the traumatic experience relates to an unexpected and/or undesired loss (like the sudden or highly depriving death of a dear person, the loss of an internal organ or of a limb, to be involved in an accident or in an earthquacke,

or in a war), the type of anxiety does not relate to an unclear ground but to a sudden and uncontrolled loss of ground security, that the self could not sufficiently foresee. A sudden trauma provokes a change in the whole figure/ground relationship. The problem is that the self cannot assimilate the novelty and everything is suspended, the self might continue to work based on figures that are no longer supported by habitual ground (like a mother who doesn't change anything in the room of the child who has died from an accident) or might refuse to function, suspended in a lifeless state, unable to assimilate the change. Flashbacks and repeated thoughts of the loss (or anesthesia) are experienced, fixed figures that cannot be assimilated into the ground.

The therapeutic field is characterized by a void, like an air bubble. The client does not express his/her pain completely, the therapist does not approach the drama till the end for fear of being too much for the client.

7. Four kinds of ground experience in clinical practise

What I have said above can help us to see the experience of contact-making in different kinds of suffering, describing the experience of the ground, the unfolding of the self in contact, the emerging figure and the feeling in the therapeutic field, which can orient the clinical observation for diagnostic and therapeutic purposes.

We need a diagnosis which is based on experiential and dialogical aspects (Staemmler, 2006; Francesetti, Gecele, 2009; Roubal et al., 2013). Aesthetic and phenomenological knowledge of the contact-making are our basic tools (Miller, 2003; 2011).

I summarize in figure 3 these four aspects of the experience of self in contact, in order to give readers a clear orientation of what to look at according to our theory of self.

Perceptive style	The (co-created) ground experience	Excitement and growth at the contact boundary	The (co-created) emergent experience of the figure	"Diagnostic" feelings in the field
Neurotic	The ground is sufficiently clear about *who feels what* and provides a *basic existential safety*. This normal condition can be experienced on a continuum which ranges from a less to a more anxious perception.	The contact boundary is partly desensitized (as an effect of anxiety), some spontaneity is lost, the other (environment) cannot be reached with a good balance between active and passive presence (middle mode).	In case of desensitization of the contact boundary, the ego-function cannot deliberate in the fullness of senses: the other is not seen clearly and some figures can be predominant and not "in contact".	The field is experienced as reliable and clear, although with painful contents.
Psychotic	The ground is so full of anxiety that it is difficult to see who feels what and to rely on some feeling of safety.	There is no perception of the contact boundary; there is not a distinct self and a distinct environment, one cannot feel oneself-in-contact.	No clear figures are possible. They are based on the need to control (paranoiac) or to suspend (depression) or to enforce (schizophrenia) the excitement for contact	No perceived possibilities in the field to stop or calm the anxiety.
Borderline	The ground experience is unstable and polarized: opposite (bad and good) perceptions of oneself and the other.	The contact boundary is characterized by the activity of preserving a "draft" of the sense of self, in order not to be swallowed into "fusion" with the environment and madness.	The wish to overcome the unstable and contradictory sense of self and reach the other with a differentiated sense of self is the recurrent figure.	What seems stable can become unstable. The client can never be sure that the therapist is good (or bad), the therapist can never be sure that the client's (good or bad) experience will last.
Traumatized/ abused	Collapsed sense of ground: mixed feelings and confusion about roles and moral aspects (nothing is sure any more); it's impossible to integrate the episode(s) and let another figure emerge.	Dissociation: the self continues to exist on "another level", where the traumatic situation does not exist.	The traumatic figure becomes a fixed one, in a compelled way. The figure is not the solution for an intentionality for contact, it does not close the Gestalt.	Everything has to remain under control and not openly said.
Traumatized/ loss	Collapsed sense of ground: sudden and uncontrolled loss of ground security.	The self cannot integrate the new situation, and continues to function trying to ignore the novelty.	Figures are no longer supported by habitual ground, they can be repeated (obsession) or forgotten (anaesthesia).	A void (like an air bubble).

Figure 3 – The experience of the ground, the unfolding of self-in-contact, the figure and the field in the case of suffering of the between

8. Conclusion: the self as an active and creative experience of the world

The Gestalt theory of self allows us to see the beauty of human nature in contact. The founders did an excellent job in developing a theory that grasps the sense of spontaneity and naturalness in human relationships, but also the tension towards contact with environment that exists in each and every meaningful movement and the ability to create good, original forms in order to reach the other even in the most difficult situations. The way in which they integrated the phenomenological, aesthetic, pragmatic and Gestalt approaches is nothing short of a work of art, and it allowed us to be effective and unique, able to grasp the essence of human relationships and their movement-towards until today, as was recently highlighted by neuroscience on the one hand (Gallese *et al.*, 2007; Damasio, 1994) and by intersubjective (Stern, 2010) and relational theories on the other (Orange *et al.*, 1997). Thanks to this theory of the self, our clinical approach can be deep, effective and practical at the same time.

It allows us therapists to fall in love with the life of our patients (Polster, 1987), to gain the ability to see and support their "art of living" (Spagnuolo Lobb, Amendt-Lyon, 2003), instead of seeing pathologies, illnesses, lack of vitality.

Hopefully, I have been able to provide a few new tools to allow a more accurate gaze with which to observe the background of the experience, all of this while taking into account both the evolutionary aspects and the figure/background perceptive play, which organism and environment create whenever there is suffering at the contact boundary. My hope is that this multi-faceted gaze on the background may help incorporate, within a modern kind of theory that is still faithful to the origins, what we as Gestalt therapists can accomplish so well on a daily basis by assimilating the art of Gestalt.

It is with gratitude towards our founders, who were able to develop a theory that can grasp the beauty of life, that I entrust this work to the colleagues who will read it. Their feedback will be of great interest to me, in whichever moment and from whichever part of the world it may come.

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15.

Michael Vincent MILLER

The Self and Other Errors

A meditation on reflexivity and beyond

Ah, you ask me things
I wish I could not even ask myself.
John Ashbery, "The Confronters"

I.

I ask myself, do psychological theories and the clinical practices derived from them really need the self? Specifically, does Gestalt therapy, with respect to theory and practice, need the self? The short answer is yes and no. In between the yes and the no, there is a great deal to explore.

"I ask myself…" Who is doing what to whom in that rather peculiar phrase? Are not questions something that one addresses to others to get information or permission or what have you? "I ask myself" and do I then get an answer from "myself"? What kind of knowledge is this, presumably delivered from a "myself" to an "I"? Is the "I" now in possession of something it didn't have before? And where did the "myself" go then? Or does the very act of asking create the "I" perhaps by merging it with the "myself"? All these questions take place in the neighborhood where the problem of defining the self is born.

A very big psychotherapy industry trafficking in concepts such as "the self" "self-esteem" "self-realization" "core self" "authentic self" "false self" "self-objects" being your "true self" and so on has arisen from the capacity, probably unique to humans, to treat themselves as both subject and object. As the philosopher Theodore Mischel puts it in describing the work of psychologists from various schools of thought, "most issues involving the self" spring from questions "in which a person becomes the object of his own activities" (Mischel, 1977, 3).

From the standpoint of language, the philosopher of science, Stephen E. Toulmin agrees with Mischel. He states that "'self', treated as the name of a hypothetical entity, or intervening explanatory variable in speculative psychological theories; and...'self', treated as a diagnostic term, in clinical psychological theories... respectively arise out of and connect up with... everyday perceptions of reflexive human activity and attitudes" (Toulmin, 1977, 291-2) By reflexive human activity and attitudes, Toulmin means language such as "I ask myself" as well as terms like "self-control" or "self-awareness"

Toulmin argues that the primary sense of the term "self" is not a freestanding noun, but arises from its original use as an auxiliary part of compound nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, and he compares it in this function to the German "*Selbst*" and the French "*-même*" and third-person "*se*" Also the Latin "*se-*" and the Greek "*auto-*" (Toulmin, 1977, 300) Toulmin seems to be right with respect to the use of the noun "self" in psychological theory and the other human sciences. The first full study of the self as freestanding that I am familiar with is the chapter entitled "Consciousness of Self" in Volume I of William James' 1890 *Principles of Psychology*. James' two-volume work is a landmark in the early transition of psychology out of philosophy on its way to becoming a separate field. But there is also etymological evidence that "self" stood alone as a noun in the vocabulary of Old English during the late medieval period, around the fourteenth century, and only later became absorbed into compound reflexive words. (Leave it to the English to kick off preindustrial individualism, even before Montaigne did it for the French during the Renaissance!)

If we follow Mischel's and Toulmin's leads, we would take the noun "self" as used in psychology at least, to be a linguistic artifice manufactured by beheading or cutting off the feet of a compound, reflexive word. In phrases like "I did it myself" or "I'm suffering from low self-esteem" the prefix "self-" or at the other end, the suffix"-self" acts like an intensifier with one main function.They emphatically point to activities that one is doing oneself, doing to oneself, or are being done to oneself. Clearly these are useful; we use them all the time. But they give rise to a question beyond language. What is the "oneself" that these compound words designate?

This is the same as asking, what is the ontological status of whatever the noun "self" cut loose from its moorings, and heading out to the open sea, is supposed to designate? Does it represent an entity that exists? Is it just a useful metaphor to account for certain human behaviors? Or is it ultimately an attempt at concocting a causal explanation that might end up standing in the way of one's relationship with one's world? In the latter two cases one needs to be concerned about a frequent misdirection in theories about human nature—that a linguistic concept, perhaps useful in certain respects, gets eventually treated as though it has a thing-like existence (reified) and therefore stands for an actual reality or truth.

As Gestalt therapists, we have learned – or we ought to have – to be wary of the word 'the'. It readily leads us to treat the word that follows it as though it were an actual thing, thus fixing it in space and freezing it in time. Early psychoanalysis tended to do this with its basic concepts, such as the unconscious, the id, the superego, the Oedipus complex, the object-relation. The basic ideas of Gestalt therapy can become threatened with the same fate when they are called *the* contact boundary, *the* organism, *the* environment, *the* cycle of contact, *the* field, *the* self. What can become lost is the sense that experience, including experience of one's self, is made and remade moment to moment. And this sense is the heart of Gestalt therapy. Nevertheless, I certainly do not pretend that it is easy to find words that in themselves preserve that perspective. The manner in which our grammar has evolved makes it easier to represent spatiality than temporality in matters of human behavior and emotional life.

All these useful concepts from psychoanalysis and Gestalt therapy grow less so when people use them in a way that hardens them into being treated as realities. The same goes for abstract nouns that are treated as universally applicable so that the specific details in experience disappear in a fog of generality and become lost. We need to remind ourselves that concepts and abstractions are metaphors—suggestive words that need to remain light on their feet, not to become sodden with weighty proclamations that they stand for the nature of reality.

Gestalt therapy is a theory of human nature and an associated practice based on flux which is also to say, on time as much as space—on the ever-changing details of experience, through creation, de-creation, and co-creation taking place in a web of connections. It is still the only psychotherapy that has taken up this perspective with full seriousness, which resembles in many respects the attitude of phenomenology in philosophy. That is why Gestalt therapy and phenomenology go well together hand-in-hand, although they did not grow up together. Some Gestalt therapists replace the noun "self" with the verb "selfing" as do certain Buddhist thinkers and teachers in the west. Thus Gestalt therapy, like Buddhist psychology, emphasizes the idea that there is no fixed self but a temporal process in which a sense of self arises and subsides, is created and recreated. "Selfing" is a rather ugly verb for anyone who cares about the English language, but it makes the point.

The point that it does make—that what we call self is temporal and therefore constructed and changeable—is of immediate clinical relevance. One reason people come into psychotherapy is because their lives seem to have congealed. They experience themselves traveling repetitiously and unhappily down a narrow fixed channel. This has become their sense of self, their sense of who they feel that they are. Therapy can help move them toward something different and new, opening the horizon of possibilities, helping turn what has become

repetitious compulsion back into what it once was, or could have been, i.e. novelty and choice.

In particular, their sense of self has become fixed in a significantly constricting way. As Perls and Goodman put it in *Gestalt Therapy* (from here on called PHG), they "can't help themselves" (PHG, 1951, 25) -and this helplessness occurs in both senses – that they cannot be of assistance to themselves in their own best interests, so must turn to outside help; and they are not free to make choices because they are in the grip of a compulsion. But if restoring the freedom to choose one's own noes and yeses is an aim of therapy, the therapy itself needs to be grounded in theory that supports actual opportunities for choice—that is, an openness to possibilities based neither on the therapist's agenda drawn from theoretical formulations nor the patient's agenda with its often repetitive limitations. The less agenda the better.

Why the less agenda the better? Because the best psychotherapy, in my view, is a down-to-earth phenomenological outlook put to practical use in the therapy session itself. Gestalt therapy is rooted in a worldview that is also exemplified by philosophers, such as Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, despite the fact that in its beginnings Gestalt therapy theory drew very little from Husserl and not all in any apparent way from Heidegger or Merleau-Ponty. Phenomenology is something many Gestalt therapists are still discovering, since its relevance was not yet made clear at the beginning, given the many psychological viewpoints and philosophical influences that came together in the origin of Gestalt therapy.

In thinking about phenomenological method as a fact of practice, it would not be far afield to say that each session needs to begin in a state of innocence. Not the innocence of childhood, which is naivety, but what the philosopher Paul Ricœur calls "second innocence". Ricœur's second innocence resembles childhood openness, but only after experience. He sets forth an ideal of phenomenological innocence, where historical knowledge and memory are set aside so that one can enter the new moment as genuinely new, thus giving full attention to what is actually present. This is not an easy assignment. It is what Fritz Perls intended when he called Gestalt therapy "the philosophy of the obvious" but pointed out in addition that the obvious was the hardest thing for most people to stay in touch with. It is also what Sartre means in *Being and Nothingness* when he remarks that "nothing is behind itself," implying that philosophical thought must begin by studying what is actually there rather than looking for deep causes behind the given scene.

Both Ricœur and Sartre give good advice for therapists, too. I like to think that psychotherapy is most effective when it is more like jazz than classical music. In jazz, there is no fixed score when a player is soloing. But jazz musicians are so thoroughly grounded in the practised knowledge of their instrument, in the background of their tradition, and in harmony, counterpoint, and other

facets of music theory that they can forget it all in the moment of improvised performance even as it still supports them. In relation to theory, that is how psychotherapy ought to be. With these thoughts in mind, let us see where the so-called self comes into the picture.

II. The tripartite self

The views of Mischel and Toulmin that the discovery in psychology of self has its linguistic origins in the reflexive "myself" etc. are interesting and important from the standpoint of theory construction. But this is a limiting view for an understanding of the actual and full emergence of self. I am going to argue that the reflexive is only a phase in the moment-to-moment history of emerging self, both in early development and forever after in adulthood—albeit one with important consequences, and therefore the one I am going to give the most weight in what follows.

If we begin from the notion that self is a temporal event in—or, more accurately, of—a field, we could then imagine there might be unfolding temporal "stages" of how self is made and manifests itself. "In a field" suggests self as particle, "of a field" self as wave. They are both valid descriptive perspectives with different purposes, as they are both Newtonian and quantum mechanical. But there is more to be gained in therapy by stressing the temporal fluctuating wave than the spatial and seemingly fixed particle. I put stages here in what philosophers sometimes call "scare quotes" for the following reason. The notion of stages, which in psychology has been applied to many phases of human life, from early development to grieving to dying, can offer a useful way to organize and communicate certain understandings of human behavior. But such stages often become treated as though they are firm, bounded categories that behavior fits into neatly. Stages as fixed nouns are as limiting as fixations of any other psychological concepts. Perhaps they are better described as "stagings" that unfold in time. They can occur simultaneously, become interwoven, even follow each other in different or opposite directions from how they are "supposed" to occur. It is important not to employ them with an overly serious heavy hand. They need to be regarded lightly, because they are complex dancings of experience in the process of being made. The stages or stagings I am about to describe are complex, mobile, and shift back and forth. Though we can differentiate them to a large extent, they also blur into one another.

With all of this, in mind, I would like to propose a conception of how self unfolds in three stages or stagings. The first of these —and generally the first to occur in any contact could be called *forming self*. In a way it is a kind of pre-self, so far as one's identity goes, but it is far from being absence of self.

Rather, it is self in a condition of coming into being through taking on and being given form. It is essentially pre-linguistic, both in how it first develops in infancy and perhaps also in how it functions largely in all later contacting as well, although once language gets in the picture, it is difficult to free anything from it. So in both its origins and later functioning it begins to take shape mainly through sensing and motor activity—especially and increasingly through sensing what it likes and does not and then responding by going toward or moving away. These movements are among the first yeses and noes, two movements of being that become among the first words and play a major role in all future manifestations of self.

Forming self establishes the ground for the emergence of a second stage that I will call *reflexive self*. Reflexivity is instrumental in creating our sense of self in both connotations of sense—sensory experience of feeling I am myself, as well as the making of what it means to be oneself, which requires language in a way that I will momentarily discuss further. This stage is where reflexivity of the kind Mischel and Toulmin address becomes the central issue in thinking about the nature of self. Though the reflexive sense of self involves feeling both oneself and one's world, the center of gravity now moves in the direction of meanings, such as identity—and that is why this stage cannot arise in full bloom before language. *Reflexive self* is what one comes to identify as oneself. An infant may attain this to some extent in a mainly sensory mode, but the aspect of self that Perls and Goodman define as "finding and making meaning" requires at least some development of language.

And finally, there is *post-self*. This is not a perfect name for what I have in mind, so I offer it tentatively until I manage to come up with a better one. By *post-self* I do not mean an aftermath or a closing, as in that stage, very different in its function from what I intend, that the authors of PHG called post-contact. Nor does it mainly serve the purposes of assimilation. It is rather the situation where self, having already arisen to a level of aware foreground, can let go of being preoccupied with itself. No longer needed yet well-established, self becomes background and support for one's loving, working, and other important relating to one's world. This is similar to a state of existing that many spiritual traditions aim toward. I contend that the stage of post-self has everything to do with the fullest absorption in life and the fullest expression of one's own vitality. The previous stage, the reflexive sense of self, previous only in that it is a prerequisite, under healthy conditions provides the supportive ground upon which post-self blossoms. Unfortunately, due mainly to fixations that lurk in the reflexive stage, it is often precisely the attainment of post-self that has become sealed off. That in itself constitutes a basic reason for going into psychotherapy. If one cannot enter the stage of what I call post-self, the richest and most satisfying horizons for loving and for creative work simply will not open up.

The overall functioning of self as temporality in relation to contact has been beautifully described by Jean-Marie Robine in his essay "The Self of the Situation" (Robine, 2012, English Translation by Claire Blatz, Karen Vincent Jones, and Olivier Winghart. Kindle ebook, 2015). The reason I have broken this down into three distinguishable phases is because I want to concentrate primarily and in more detail on certain facets of self-making that especially have to do with questions of health and pathology. These, I will argue, are the most closely connected to the stage I call reflexive.

Like all human experience, each stage has to be made, that is, it must be staged, even when we are not conscious of the staging. Although the three stages mostly do occur in the order they are presented here and indeed lend support to each other (and the very names I have given them tend to reinforce that order), there is nothing that makes this the inevitable way they arrange themselves. Nor are they a one-time event because nothing about them is fixed. All three are aspects of contacting one's world and withdrawing from it, so that they have to be continually made and re-made in the process of making contact. They recur whenever contact is happening. As Robine points out, "what we call 'self' only exists when and where there is contact....it is contact. The self is folding and unfolding: movement" (Robine, 2012, 15)

So in this somewhat rough and probably idiosyncratic way, I have divided up how self is manifested as process. Although the tripartite division to some degree resembles the stages of contacting described in PHG as fore-contact, contact, and post-contact, it is important not to confuse them with these. My stages do not line up in quite that way. Both schemes represent the temporality inherent in self-creation and contact, but they slice it up quite differently.

The stages of self-making I am positing are closer in certain respects to another well-known threesome in Gestalt therapy. "Forming self" is not so far from id function, and "reflexive self" resembles personality function more than a little. However, my conception of forming self contains much more of the movement toward and away that expresses yes and no than does PHG's id function, since the authors mostly restrict yes and no to ego function. And my notion of reflexive self as identity-forming makes more of a case for the fluidity of continuous meaningful self-creation than PHG's personality function, which tends toward a fixed Gestalt. As for "post-self" it has almost nothing to do with PHG's ego function. In fact, I will try to show that what I mean by post-self goes well beyond ego function in delineating the fate of contact-making by resolving a problem where PHG essentially stopped and Perls in his later work definitively stopped—the problem of egotism.

In any case I am no longer satisfied with the division into id, personality, and ego functions. They are left over from mid-twentieth century ego psychology—id, from Freud, personality, from Harry Stack Sullivan, and ego, from Anna

Freud, Heinz Hartmann and others. They are metaphors (and so are mine) that dissect and distribute into categories inevitable aspects of human functioning. They have thus been useful for certain diagnostic purposes, but they do not bring out sufficiently either the developmental or temporal aspects of self in contact.

We can also ask whether all three modes of staging oneself are present when one is making contact. Maybe, maybe not. However, all three do have implications for how contact is made, in particular in what comes about when one or another takes over the foreground.

III. Reflexivity and its consequences

The strange and rather inexplicable sense of self, that is, of being a self, of feeling it and knowing it, is a reflexive creation, not just an artifact of being. Another name for this is subjectivity. The capacity for reflexivity is responsible for our rather odd ability, at once a talent and a liability, to be an agent forming our experience and to be a bystander to this at the same time, or almost at the same time. This capacity plays an important part in our basic survival, in our creative adjustments to changing circumstances, and in our ability to grow by becoming more than we already are. But if we cannot turn loose from it, there is trouble. Stuck reflexivity gives rise to neurotic character. Because the basic movements of reflexivity can construct a healthy self or a neurotic one, reflexive self gets the biggest piece of the following discussion. That is because the reflexive act of self-creation and its staging bears the most directly on therapeutic work.

However, reflexivity, a term that has been much used in postmodern philosophy, social science, and literary criticism, is too abstract to do much with. To learn more concretely *how* reflexivity operates in creating self, we can draw fruitfully on a concept that is well established in Gestalt therapy. The theory of Gestalt therapy borrowed the notions of introjection and projection from psychoanalysis; the difference is that in order to emphasize that their characteristics are not fixed but are continually being remade in contact, it presents them as verbs—introjecting and projecting. To these Perls added—in *Ego, Hunger and Aggression*, and took it up again with Goodman—a formulation of his own intended to account for the way we turn physical and mental energy available for making contact back on ourselves—and named this retroflecting. I contend that the reflexivity in reflexive self is best understood specifically as *retroflected attention*. That is a straightforward idea, but it is also more complicated than it may appear at first. There are a number of important points about early human development and about Gestalt therapy theory that need to be made in order to fill it out.

In the first place, retroflecting is not absence of engagement or relationship. On the contrary, it is a particular kind of contact-making, but unusual in that it seems to involve both contact and withdrawal at the same time, or perhaps in rapid alternations, both partial. There is no self without expressing a measure of yes; and no self without expressing a measure of no. When either yes or no is as complete as it can be, self virtually disappears.

The authors of PHG recognized that there is always engagement in retroflecting. Indeed, they see the engagement as prior to the retroflection, an emphasis I agree with–"Suppose now the outgoing energies, of orientation and manipulation, are fully engaged in the environmental situation,...but he cannot cope and must interrupt, he is afraid to hurt (destroy), or be hurt; he will necessarily be frustrated; then the engaged energies are turned against the only available safe objects in the field, his own personality and body. These are retroflections."* (*PHG, 235)

This is helpful. Nevertheless I have two problems with it. In the first place, it analyzes reflexive self-making only from the dark side, as though it only leads to inhibition and self-defeat. That is how Perls treats retroflecting in *Ego, Hunger and Aggression*, and the authors continue to view it as pathology in PHG. Secondly, probably due to the influence of Reich, most of the focus on retroflecting in Gestalt therapy has been on its physical components, such as muscular contractions, rigid or interrupted movements, choked-off voice and withheld speech, anaesthetized or painful places in the body. Reich's character armor, described in the passage above as energy available for contact re-directed toward oneself (what do the authors really mean here by "energy" which is a Reichian term?) has been a development of undoubted therapeutic value. Isadore From taught again and again (I was trained and supervised by him for seven years) that in general a patient's observable retroflections were a good starting point in the therapy session precisely because they can be seen and heard.

In defining reflexive self as retroflected attention, I am deliberately contrasting the term "attention" with "awareness" a more customary word associated with Gestalt therapy. The concept of awareness as a fundamental means to bring oneself into the present moment has permeated the practice, the teaching, and the writing about Gestalt therapy from its beginnings to this day. Fritz Perls began the first training workshop of his that I participated in—this was in San Francisco in 1966—by having each of us, a group of twenty or so therapists, as I recall, say in turn "At this moment I am aware that I can be no different than I am at this moment" and then add one more sentence. This exercise illustrated Perls's faith in awareness of the present moment as a wake-up call that could bring us back from the places in which we had lost ourselves. In the workshops I attended, Perls often called such awakenings "mini-satoris" Belief in the power of awareness is also evident in PHG where he and Goodman write in italics

"*the achievement of a strong Gestalt is itself the cure...*" (PHG, 8), and make it clear that awareness is the path to this achievement–"awareness is not a thought about the problem but is itself a creative integration of the problem" (*Ibid*)

I chose "attention" over "awareness" in defining reflexive self-creation in order to illuminate a distinction that I regard as important. Attention is a creative force in a way that awareness by itself is not. I do not think awareness in itself is a creative integration, although it is a beginning. Awareness opens you to the world, and it can alert you to your present condition, but it does not in itself bring you to the world in order to make something new in the meeting. For that you have to add aggression (in Perls's sense) to awareness because awareness in itself has neither force nor direction. Attention, however, is always directed toward something. There are two basic directions you can go in life at any moment–toward others and the world, or away from them. Attention takes you to the world or to yourself or both.

To put it in another way, attention is directed awareness—always directed toward something—and therefore contains what phenomenology calls "intentionality" The Gestalt psychologist, Wolfgang Köhler stated this understanding of the relationship between attention and intentionality quite clearly in 1930–"There is no such experience as attention taken separately, apart from any objective; rather a person feels directed toward something, in the manner which is called attention. As soon as we realize this concrete nature of most attitudes, it becomes possible and even necessary to unite our functional ideas about them with the scheme of a field structure corresponding to the spatial structure of our experiences. Attitudes issuing from the self and directed toward definite parts of the environment will thus be regarded as based upon directed states of the field"* (Köhler, 1930, 247). Much more could be said about this intriguing passage, but that goes beyond my subject matter here.

Phenomenological intentionality, an idea originated by Husserl toward healing the Cartesian split between mind and matter, insists that all perception, feeling, and thought is about something and directed toward that something—thus subject and object, mind and matter are forever joined in experience. Awareness lacks intentionality. The difference between awareness and attention is like the difference between a line and a vector. A line simply establishes a magnitude. A vector, represented in mathematics as a length of line with a little arrow at one end, has both magnitude and direction.

It makes no sense to speak of retroflected awareness. You cannot change the direction of that which has no direction. You can repress awareness, but you cannot retroflect it. The directedness of attention then illuminates how reflexivity plays the main role in creating subjective sense of self. It will also be seen to have an essential part in enabling the realization of what I call post-self. As I said earlier, there are essentially two main directions you can go in

life—toward others and the world, or away from them (and, of course, all the mixtures in between). Attention, unlike awareness, brings both the movement and the connection (or disconnection) into the foreground.

IV. Developmental reflexivity

Let us look at some of these issues in a developmental way by backing up about as far back as one can go.

I learned from my colleague, Dr. Ruella Frank, who also has a chapter in this book, that when a newborn is held by the head and neck, it can then use its arm to reach out toward an object. Since the newborn can only see about eighteen inches in front of itself, its act of reaching is presumably toward only certain properties of a relatively undifferentiated object. In a similar way a newborn can reach with its mouth to the mother's nipple and extend an arm to the breast, which is also not much differentiated at this point. Thus the newborn is already engaged with the world in ways that will play a part in the development of forming self. At three months the baby can see farther and other elements of self-support have further assembled themselves, including the capacity to lift its head and use both arms to push away from the earth in order to then reach out. And by five months, the baby can shift its weight to hold itself up with one arm, leaving the other free to reach out toward what interests it. At each juncture of early development, the combinations–expressed in pushing and reaching–of self-support and engagement with the world become more organized and more coordinated with focused looking. Forming self becomes increasingly complex and deliberate, and thereby more conscious and intentional, as it moves toward becoming reflexive self. (Ruella Frank, personal conversation)

Even during the later months in utero, certainly by the time it is born, an infant probably begins to have a rudimentary sense of itself, chiefly through touch, movement, and other sensory arousal, then after birth through the give-and-take of attachment responses, especially with the mother, and through the coming and going, the presence and absence of caretakers. And amid all this busy relational activity, the infant already is exhibiting its own ways of expressing its yeses and noes—by pushing away, turning aside, rearing back, reaching out, grasping, or pulling toward, all indications of what I have called forming self and perhaps the seeds of an aware sense of self, the roots of reflexive subjectivity. These movements have been carefully studied by Frank (Frank and La Barre, 2010), especially in how they continue to shape engagement and relationship in the world of adults, which tells us that forming self is still taking part in adult contact.

There is one meaning of reflexivity that operates at the permeable boundary between forming self and reflexive self. This is the physiological sense of reflex, which is an automatic, involuntary response, as when the doctor hits your knee with a little rubber hammer. What is of special importance in this definition of reflexivity is its psychological implication. In the course of childhood, certain characteristic responses come into being, often self-defensive inventions when the intimate environment for the child is not safe; and these often become deeply buried responses, below the level of conscious identity, in the reflexive self. They continue to operate like knee-jerk reflexes and therefore illustrate how forming self continues to function in nearly every encounter in adult life. Obviously therapeutic work that brings forming self-behavior into the light of awareness is valuable. It is close to what Freud meant about turning id into ego.

At some point during the first year of life, an infant begins to experience itself as both an "I" and a "me" i.e. as both subject and object, a development that has often been called self-reflective awareness. This is likely to be a uniquely human attribute, although we cannot really know whether certain other animals have some form of it. One reason for which it is likely to be restricted to humans, though, is because it seems to require at least a beginning sense of language and grammar, in order to have the kind of consciousness in which one designates oneself as both subject and object. To put this in another way, the kind of thinking that consists of talking to oneself has definite linguistic features, such as grammar. Most linguists these days would agree with this. We can imagine, daydream, and fantasize in pictures, but we think grammatically.

And wherever there is a subject and object, linguistically speaking, a blank place is staked out between them for a verb to enter so that it can transfer or carry out an action from the subject that does something to the object. It is likely that this marker for a verb may represent one of the main portals for society and culture, through the family and other authorities, to invade the mind and turn us into the citizens it wants us to be. In other words, society slips in or forces or otherwise introduces its ideological and often manipulative verbs into the gap between the 'I' and the 'me'.

No creature, so far as we can ascertain, is born either loving itself or hating itself, slapping itself on the back or criticizing itself; it just is. Reflexive attitudes, such as self-love or self-hate, have to be learned via the split in one's nature into subject and object, and through the ways in which the surrounding familial and social world takes advantage of and operates on this split. I doubt that in mental life there exists any advanced form of reflexive activity of the kind that shapes full self-awareness until the psychological division into subject and object has settled into place.

Therefore, I see no reason to assume that there is much, if any, greatly meaningful sense of identity until the split has occurred. Winnicott makes the

lovely relational point that the baby's first self is in the mother's eyes. His notion is an important one that emphasizes the extent to which, even from the beginning of human development, our sense of self is always forming in relation to others. To be sure, an infant is engaged with its parents and intimate environment before it has anything that ought to be called a self. But I do not see how the mother's, father's or anyone else's attitude and responses can be internalized and assimilated until the division into an 'I' and a 'me' has taken place, which makes the reflexive sense of self possible. Winnicott means "eyes" in a metonymic sense broadly to represent recognition (or its opposite), attitude, emotion, and so on. The gaze of the other is one way that verbs, such as in "I love myself" or "I hate myself" are introduced between the 'I' and the 'me'. They continue from then on to play a part in influencing the development of a sense of self and the unfolding of its later forms.

V. Self as pathos: the fixed Gestalt

It follows from the above considerations about early development that turning one's attention back on oneself as both subject and object—the basic act of reflexivity—is a central activity, and definitely an activity, in creating a sense of self. As I pointed out, retroflection, with all its mixed blessings, has often been portrayed as a resistance or disturbance of contact and something therefore to be treated mainly as a dimension of pathology. It is true that retroflection is at work in almost every sort of symptom formation and neurotic character, insofar as it is employed to either eliminate or fix in place feelings and needs by repressing, denying, or in other ways holding them back. Otherwise those feelings and needs would naturally express themselves. They would be carried out in need-meeting or expressive action both aimed toward and drawing from the surrounding world.

Both engagement with the world and self-creation are taking place at every moment of one's existence. This brings up the ongoing pathos of neurosis. To the extent you experience being in your world, you have to contend with uncertainty, the unknowns of life. What is in store for you, will you succeed or fail, find love or not, become ill or stay healthy? Above all when and how will you die? For a young child, feeling safe during the stages of forming self and the budding sense of identity or reflexive self is even more primary than feeling loved. Too much uncertainty is traumatic. Clearly, things are at their best when love and safety go together. For an adult, such as one who may have been traumatized by never feeling safe as a child, uncertainty can forever still seem too threatening. That threat will likely lead to premature withdrawal of

one's attention from one's world, curving it back oneself. This kind of dialectic of engagement and withdrawal can occur over and over again each step of the way through life.

But why? Towards which end? Because the only available means of warding off uncertainty, if you cannot tolerate the inevitable uncertainties of life, is through fixing in place an illusory certitude by attempting to control relations with others, the passing of time, the fact of your own death. In *Intimate Terrorism*, I defined anxiety as "the attempt to control what cannot be controlled" (Miller, 1996, 31) Alas, all such attempts add up to nothing in the end other than an illusion of control through locking oneself in place as a fixed Gestalt. Therein resides the basis for turning reflexivity to the purpose of creating a neurotic sense of self.

Consider chronic anxiety, for example–the chronically anxious person looks at the unknown of the future and regards it as an approaching emergency. His or her anxious world is one in which bad news is always on the way, as though the future is always taking a turn for the worse. The reflexive sense of self that such anxiety creates treats this anticipated future as though it is already present by becoming an intensely mobilized self in the way one becomes in an actual emergency, i.e. the muscles are contracted, adrenalin is pumping, heart rate is increased, breath is held in. But there is nothing there upon which to act and discharge this over-mobilized state. As though pressed up against a threatening world with no room to breathe, the anxious self cannot exhale, and goes limp with relief, as one does when a real emergency is over.

All neurotic functioning tries in one way or another to stop time in its tracks by fixating oneself. The fixation also tries to control others, either by clinging to them for help or, if they are perceived as the source of danger, holding them at bay. Take the reflexivity of the depressed self. Whereas the anxious self is stuck in confluence with a supposed emergency and cannot withdraw, the depressed self is an expert at withdrawal, but cannot or will not get back into contact. Depression is rather like someone who has exhaled, and thus spent all breath, but is unable or unwilling to take the next one. Limp and demobilized to the point of collapse, like a picture of grief, the depressed self cannot rise to contact and relationship and either stays in isolation with the bedcovers pulled over its head or enters the world with a self-pitying cry for help.

Whereas the anxious self lives the future as an emergency, the depressed self turns to the past but only as loss. The purpose of mourning is to heal the wound of loss through painfully retrieving one's psychological commitment to the lost person or situation. For the depressed self, however, there is no end to mourning, since it feels like one's very self is lost. Freud, in his essay, "*Mourning and Melancholia*" had already defined depression as an unfinishable state of grief (Freud 1918/1950, 152-170). The basic reflexive act for the depressed person

creates a fixed self that is like a mausoleum or tombstone to loss. Of course, such monuments which are dedicated to past losses and made of materials such as stone or metal, last not only into the present but into the indefinite future. Chronic depression is the state of one who grieves not only the past and present but also the future. When spring approaches in an atmosphere of rejoicing, as buds begin to appear on tree limbs and the birds to return, the depressed self already knows winter is at hand, the leaves turning brown and dropping to the ground, the flowers withering, the birds long gone. The past as loss has penetrated the present and the future as well.

Jean-Paul Sartre has described depression as a way of sending the world off into the distance, rendering it colorless and grey, undifferentiated and uninteresting. He calls such states "incantations" as though they are magic spells (Sartre, 1948, 65ff). Depression casts a spell to make life seem worthless. What is made clear by Sartre's metaphor is the degree to which depression can be a self-made condition.

Both anxiety and depression are self-referential, reflexive conditions, although in very different ways. In this sense, they are both heavy with self, far too heavy. Both depart from giving attention to the actual present moment—although one could also say their states are their actual present moment—but they go in roughly opposite directions–anxiety toward the its perceived world, depression away from any world, anxiety toward its construction of the future into the present, depression toward its construction of the past into the present and future.

Along these lines, we could continue on to examine many possibilities of reflexive self-construction, such as the way paranoia makes a figural self that exists as though surrounded by threats, conspiracies, and deceptions–a histrionic self always on center stage in heightened states of ecstasy or despair; a narcissistic self reflecting its greater, if quickly vaporizing, glory in a world of mirrors, a borderline self, desperate for self-protection, in that it never knows in relationships whether it will be hugged or beaten, and so on.

In each of the so-called neurotic character types one can discern the dialectic of engagement and withdrawal, of attention going outward and then curving back on oneself. The paranoid sense of self, for example, keeps the dangerous others at a distance yet presents itself to itself as a center of attention among them by believing they are conspiring against him. The title essay in my book *Teaching a Paranoid to Flirt* suggests an unusual way to loosen up the fixed self of paranoia, by performing an exaggerated, all-encompassing skit of his or her suffering, the person who has developed hysterical or histrionic sense of self clings to others and makes a demand that they take care of him or her.

Each of these types centrally involves self-reflexive activity that pulls out of its world of possibilities certain elements and sews them up into its sense of self,

such that they tend to live lives that can only travel down narrow, delimited channels. Perls and Goodman call this the "personality function" of the self. I am making a slightly different turn here in that I do not depict an overall self of which reflexivity is a function. I think self is always an act of creation, beginning with forming self, not yet aware of itself as an identity, becoming reflexive self, which is identity. Perhaps only my naming is very different from theirs, but I am also putting the accent in a different place. I don't envisage a self of which self-creation is a functior.. I see only the self-referential continually making itself.

VI. The path to post-self

I have already mentioned that Perls and Goodman hold to a mostly negative definition of retroflection. Their account of a person who characteristically retroflects also verges on something not very savory, called the "retroflector" (PHG, 235). He is portrayed as one who exercises "deliberate self-control" that tends to inhibit spontaneity and creativity, producing instead denial, self-defeat, and failed enterprises. This tendency to consider reflexivity only from the standpoint of its role in pathology is widespread well beyond Gestalt therapy. For instance, David Shapiro, a very smart psychodynamic theorist with a phenomenological bent, who has written several books about character-formation, asks "What distinguishes neurotic styles or character from non-neurotic ways or dispositions of the personality? The answer was not at all clear to me at first, though, once recognized, it hardly seems subtle. The neurotic personality or character—I will use the terms interchangeably—is one that reacts against itself, it reacts, reflexively, against certain of its own tendencies" (Shapiro, 1989, x.)

A different reading that is both broader and deeper, of our fundamental human capacity for reflexive activity is possible and essential to take into account. An interesting fact is that one can develop larger, and not only pathological, sense of the reflexive capacity from tying together two themes already present within PHG itself, although the authors do not connect them as such. One of these themes we have already discussed. The other one carries a great deal of weight throughout the book.

The first theme is that the PHG authors state that retroflection is not so purely a solipsistic or individualistic act as it may appear to be. As I pointed out earlier, Perls and Goodman make it quite clear that retroflection occurs only *after* one has already "fully engaged in the environmental situation" (*Ibid*) Even though retroflection turns one's energies back on oneself, they still view it as constituting a mode of engagement with the organism/environment field, as all

human making of experience, including a sense of self, must be.

The second theme is the aesthetic emphasis, which works its way throughout the book. Perls and Goodman imply again and again that all shaping of human experience—and this surely includes self-creation—parallels in key features the work that artists do. In PHG, the self is said to be forming figures and grounds, and the spontaneous, self-regulating figures made by the self in health are described in terms of aesthetic properties–"brightness, clarity, unity, fascination, grace, vigor, release..." (PHG, 8) Could there be a clearer list of the qualities one looks for in works of art, whether poetry, music, or painting? The authors took this emphasis from the combined influence of Otto Rank and John Dewey. Dewey, who certainly influenced Paul Goodman, wrote a book titled *Art and Experience,* in which he applies such art-like criteria to the making of everyday life. And in works like *Art and Artist* and *Will Therapy* Rank makes a distinction between the artist and the neurotic, that is between the self-making that results in good art, like the properties of figure as described above, and neurotic self-making that issues forth in bad art, which tends to be fixated, monotonously repetitive, out of touch, stereotyping, and stale. Several of my essays in *Teaching a Paranoid to Flirt* are elaborations of this theme.

Bringing these two streams together—engagement with the organism/environment field and aesthetic creation—in relation to retroflection enables us to enlarge the authors' view. The synthesis of these two themes de-pathologizes retroflection and applies it to all making of self, whether healthy or pathological. Retroflection produces symptoms, but it also goes far beyond symptom-formation into the making of all self-expressive activity. For instance, there is reflexivity in healthy spontaneity that is at once self-regulating and also takes account of the environment. That constitutes moment-to-moment self-creation that is very different from impulsiveness, one the one hand, which may resemble spontaneity, but loses contact with the environment, and from rigidity, which goes into making self-protective armor in the Reichian sense. Retroflecting does not have to be so tightly constricting and self-defeating as PHG puts forward in its portrait of the retroflector.

Therefore we can open up and play on this mode of thinking about self-creation and propose that each of us could have an entire wardrobe closet full of created selves. We could then wake up in the morning, throw open the closet, survey all those selves—striped or polka-dotted, black or colorful, pull-overs or button-ups—and decide which one we want to dress up in for today. And not only limited to today. It is possible to reconfigure the self from moment to moment.

Viewed from the perspective of Gestalt therapy, self is always in motion, operating out at the person's edges to meet a world. When it is completely at rest, as in sleep, it barely exists, except as a kind of hallucination, as in dreams.

It is not as an entity. It is more like a force or energy, rather similar to the wave aspect of a subatomic particle, and it is so much in flux that no more than an electron can it be seen or located as it is in itself at a given moment when it is busy doing something. When you try to locate it precisely, it tends to dissolve into the situation. When you try to observe it in action—that is, in the activity it is absorbed in—it is already different than when it was absorbed. The best you can do upon reflection is to perceive that it was there. This condition is also akin to an electron which you can never pin down precisely in both its location and activity. All you can perceive clearly are aftermath events such as the vapor trail it leaves behind when it is fired from an electron gun in a linear accelerator. As the great poet Wallace Stevens, as though he were writing about Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, put it in a poem, "I do not know which to prefer,/The beauty of inflections/Or the beauty of innuendoes,/The blackbird whistling/Or just after" (Stevens, 92)

VII. Aesthetics of self and other

I hope that I have made it unmistakably clear that self arises always through engagement with its world and in relationship with others. Given that state, how much can we know of the self of another? Obviously, this is an important question for psychotherapy.

In my nearly forty years of private practice, has a single patient ever shown me something I can call a self? No, not that I am aware of. After all, what can I observe or experience of another person that represents his or her self? A unique, contained physical presence, for one thing, including the observable surface of retroflecting. But if the self were identical to the body, this would reduce the self to physiology and biology, which certainly does not capture what we mean when we refer to "self" although the body is certainly an important part of the story.

Beyond mere physical presence, there is the body's expressiveness—its gestures and postures, its movements and facial expressions, its spoken language, all of which are also physical events that can be seen or heard. This seems to come closer in that they are signs and representations that express or point to self. But the ambiguous gap between such signals and their reception, between the person's intentions and the perceivable acts of their realization, make it highly dubious that what we are observing could ever be the actual self of another person. I doubt that we can ever know the self of another, which is in such continual flux that we would always be left behind anyway, even if we had more access than we actually do.

For that matter, can we even say with any real clarity what our own "self" is? We have this strange, inexplicable experience of what seems our unique subjectivity contained, it also seems, within the confines of our body. These two features appear to distinguish us from everything and everyone else. But are those enough to define our "self" or "the self" in general? The philosopher and Buddhist scholar Alan Watts put the difficulty this way–"Trying to define yourself is like trying to bite your own teeth" (quoted in *Life Magazine*, April 21, 1961)

Ultimately we are left, it seems, with locating self in the least knowable and most mysterious facet of another person's being—that which we cannot see, hear, or touch—his or her subjectivity. As William James says, "It is impossible to discover any verifiable features in personal identity" (James, *Principles of Psychology* 1890, 340) So much for empirical research into self, although recent work with mirror neurons is certainly intriguing. Moreover, we find it fruitful to live and work, including as therapists, with modes of contacting each other, being with another, and co-creating experience that transcend empiricism.

Beyond what can be observed physically, which is to say anatomically and linguistically, it is often said we only know each other by projecting. There is surely some truth in this, since we cannot think each other's thoughts or feel each other's feelings. Psychoanalysis formalized the notion of projecting, analyzed it in the structure of paranoia, and brought it into close connection with the concept of transference. Projecting in psychotherapy—and subsequently in popular usage—is usually characterized as one person, notably a patient, propelling something of himself or herself onto another person or persons or situation, notably onto the therapist. Since what comes from oneself is presumably based on past experience, projecting led to the notion of transference. Transference is based on important past relationships, particularly familial ones, projected onto the therapist along with the accompanying feelings and attitudes toward those past relationships.

To be sure, this view has been put to valuable therapeutic use. However, all too often in psychotherapy, the concept of projecting has become moralized in accord with a power structure of psychotherapy, in which the "expert" projections of the therapist, called interpretations, know more about you than you do about yourself, whereas the patient's projections about the therapist are "wrong" and therefore evidence of illness. Projecting in such a case tends to be employed for purposes of diagnosis, which might as well be called accusatory diagnosis—that is, the therapist accusing the patients of being wrong about the therapist.

Fritz Perls did not stray far, in his thinking at least, from this Freudian view of projecting. In workshops of his that I attended, he spoke of projecting for the most part as the way people disowned aspects of their own being, their

own thoughts and feelings, even their own history, by pasting them onto the environment. Yet in the way that Perls worked with people, using the empty chair and his own early training as a theater director, he did something in actuality that went well beyond the usual sense of projecting, even though he named it "owning one's projections" He took the dream to be a particularly fruitful source of uncovering and owning projections. What actually took place in Perls's empty chair work is that, through the experiential dramatization of so-called projections, without analysis like interpretation blocking the way, people were likely to discover new ways of being themselves with more range, fluidity, and productivity in making contact than they had imagined to be possible. It was often a beautiful thing to watch happen.

Here was the beginning of an outlook that went importantly beyond any question of whether projections were right or wrong. It was not yet relational, nor was it working from a "field" or the "id of the situation" But it was surely an aesthetic outlook in that the discovery by a person of what had not yet been accepted as himself or herself and the integration of this new broader scope for the self into future functioning resembled what an artist does in making art.

I think at this point we might well drop the term "projection" because it has become too much saturated with the connotation of being wrong. Used as an interpretation of what is going on in a therapy interaction, it is likely to do little more than shame a patient. Even outside of therapy, telling someone "you're projecting" is generally a tactic for disowning one's own contribution to a difficulty or conflict in personal relations. I would prefer to go back to an old-fashioned term, used much by nineteenth-century writers and poets but still alive, and say that we know each other to the extent we do, despite the unknowable mystery of each other's subjectivity, through the faculty of imagination. This has little to do with being right or wrong, and everything to do with what is being created between people. It is clearly an aesthetic emphasis—a kind of performance art. Is that not a large part of what art is all about and always has been anyway, namely trying to give expression through painting or writing, making music or dancing, to extending and deepening the known, or even to the unknowable, by giving them form through imagination? When two people do this together, they are coming to know each other in a profound way, perhaps the deepest way available to us while leaving intact the inexhaustible mystery of being. This is not only artful; it is filled with mutual respect, and also not a bad model for therapy.

VIII. Get thee behind me, self

"There is a girl the self loves.
She has been trying to study him for days
but her mind keeps wandering."
Robert Haas, "Applications of the Doctrine"

How much of fixed self do we still need in our culture? It seems as though one no longer needs to depend on identity as this or that gender, this or that sexuality. Virtual realities now begin to slide into actual ones, until it can become difficult to know what of a person's presentation is the 'real' person. Globalism may eventually make ethnic identity seem outdated, even if nations, tribes, and religions do not know that yet. Or perhaps they sense it and are fighting it for all their worth. Is fixed self as identity on the verge of obsolescence? Freud's narcissism of minor differences says "No"–the less apparent differences, the more violent the struggle to differentiate. And thus the ideological, religious, and tribal fighting grow more violent, the way the devil does when he realizes exorcism is getting close. If self as identity eventually disappears, what I hope would remain is a great disorderly diversity everywhere, which at its best can be the ground for the most fruitful creativity in all areas of life, work, and love (Sennet, 1970).

A friend of mine, an extremely committed long-term Zen Buddhist practitioner, sometimes wonders if we all might suffer some kind of brain damage in the very act of being born that makes us each experience ourselves as separate selves and the rest of the world as disconnected from ourselves and "out there" Why, after all, does our natural outlook lend itself so readily to our experiencing ourselves and our world as a dualistic split?

Phenomenology tries to overcome the dualism. Merleau-Ponty claims that our perceived images at the outset "have no place in the world" until they "pull back… and are absorbed in the world" Thus, what comprises our sense that a thing is 'real' is "precisely what steals it from our possession" thereby creating an illusion of dualism. (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, 242)

Could it be that the self-conscious sense of self is an accident of evolution? Maybe it is the result of a navigational system that evolved to help us do what we need to in negotiating our world in order to survive in it. But this navigational system just never seems to shut off completely, even in sleep. Perhaps, it just goes into an idling mode when it is not in active use. Then there would be a kind of excess, more self than we need, that makes trouble for the sense of self. Whether as sensation, idea, or emotion, or a combination of all three, the sense of self becomes more and more weightless as you learn to free your attention from unnecessary reflexive concern with yourself and immerse yourself in your

world. Eventually you discover that self weighs nothing until you choose to give it weight. Then at last you are largely free from the unnecessary reflexivity and retroflection that creates neurotic functioning.

In psychotherapy, I would argue, we need the self in order to get free of it. What does this mean? If the self is indeed retroflected attention, then consider the desirability of freeing one's attention from being too much and too often turned toward oneself. Certainly, just about every spiritual tradition beckons us in this direction. Martin Luther proclaimed in the sixteenth century that the cardinal sin is *incurvatus en se*, i.e. to be curved back on oneself, and thus away from God. If we leave God aside to make way for a secular psychological and psychotherapeutic paraphrase, we could say, as does Gestalt therapy from *Ego, Hunger, and Aggression* forward, to be curved back on oneself and away from one's world is the source of symptom-formation, neurotic functioning, and personality disorders.

To be sufficiently free of self-consciousness is a prerequisite to loving another person as other than a form of self-love, such as being in love with love, using them as a narcissistic pool to reflect oneself in, to idealize them through the process Stendhal calls "crystallization" Love is nothing but a form of attention; it is attention that appreciates the very being, which includes, even insists on, the otherness, of another. There is a Sufi tale that tells what is necessary:

> *A lover knocked at the door of his beloved.*
> *"Who is it?"*
> *" It is I."*
> *"Go away. This house will not hold you and I."*
> *The rejected lover retreated into the wilderness. For a long time, he prayed and meditated on the beloved's words. Finally he returned and knocked at the door again.*
> *"Who is it?"*
> *"It is you."*
> *Immediately the door opened.*
> (Farzan, 1974,17)

The artist who is fully in the art-making process is so thoroughly absorbed that there is little attention to self. At these moments artists and writers experience "the muse" as though the painting or poem is using them as its vehicle.

But psychotherapy, like Buddhist meditation, practices a kind of judo–it uses the self against itself. Both traditions understand that the capacity to attend to oneself creates the illusion of a fixed self. Both traditions also enlist this capacity to enlarge awareness and drop self out of the picture as ultimately no longer interesting. Let me clarify this with a couple of analogies. When you are hungry

and eat, you do not usually fasten your attention on your stomach. When all is well, your stomach simply remains in the background, mostly outside awareness, silently doing its job of digestion. But when you are ill and become nauseous or having abdominal cramps, you can hardly turn your attention away from your stomach. Illness and pain have a way of taking over the foreground.

Similarly, when the furnace in your basement breaks down, you might spend a lot of time down there attending to the furnace—checking the thermostat, testing the valves and pipes, and so on. But when the furnace is working well, you do not generally hang out in the basement, twisting knobs and dials or otherwise fretting around the furnace. You spend your time living in the rooms that the furnace is heating.

One more analogy–listening to music, you do not as a rule give your attention mainly to something like "Look at me! I'm here listening to music!" in which case you would miss the music. Instead you are, as the saying goes, "all ears" Genuine listening is an activity with an intensity that fills it up with attention. If you are really going to get the music, there is almost no room for the self to intrude on the foreground and dilute the experience. "I think I will do nothing for a long time but listen… and let sounds contribute toward me." Those lines are by Walt Whitman.

The healthiest state is absorption in one's world, not in oneself or one's 'self'. But the art of psychotherapy, a form of treatment when one seems to have lost the ability to free one's attention from oneself, needs the 'self' in order to restore the capacity to give one's attention to one's world rather than to oneself. In this regard there is a well-known controversy among psychologists and psychotherapists influenced by Buddhism. Initiated by some articles by a Buddhist psychologist, Jack Engler, this theme says "You have to become somebody before you can become nobody" (Engler, 2003) I think that this idea is extremely useful to Gestalt therapists, or any psychotherapist, for that matter. That a person's attention has become in some sense stuck in its focus on himself or herself is both the cause and the consequence of the problems, perhaps a majority of them, that people bring in to psychotherapy. The trick is to help a person illumine his or her resources, including native talents, acquired skills and arts, etc., and then discover how to redirect them from making a self with the stale characteristics of bad works of art to making one that shines with liveliness and power.

In the United States, when I was growing up, we told each other a seemingly endless supply of traveling salesmen jokes. Traveling salesmen did indeed exist. They went out into the countryside, knocked on farmhouse doors, and tried to sell whoever answered hairbrushes, vacuum cleaners, over-the-counter liquids and powders that were supposed to cure something, all kinds of mostly not very useful things. They are probably a very rare breed by now, since people,

wherever they are, order whatever they want online. At any rate, the jokes were mostly variations on stories in which the traveling salesman spotted the farmer's beautiful daughter when the farmer opened the door. The "joke" parts were almost always about how the traveling salesman fooled the farmer, got inside and made love to the beautiful daughter.

All this is by way of telling you one very unusual variation that goes like this:

> *A traveling salesman making his rounds walks by a farmhouse where there's a dog sitting on the front porch howling at the top of his lungs. Upset by this, the salesman goes to the front door and knocks. An old farmer opens the door a crack, and the salesman tells him, "Your dog is sitting here howling at the top of his lungs. Is he in pain?" "Yep!" answers the farmer, "He's sitting on a nail." "Why doesn't he move and get off it?" asks the salesman. "He ain't ready." replies the farmer.*

Well, there you have it. Neurosis: The suffering self as a fixed Gestalt. When are you ready?

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16.

Mônica BOTELHO ALVIM

The Id of the Situation as the Common Ground of Experience

In an attempt to contribute to the contemporary discussions about Gestalt therapy's theory of self, the present work sets forth an exploration of the notion of *Id of the situation*, seeking to establish a dialogue with phenomenology, namely the ideas of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. This dialogue takes into account the fact that both lines of thought are reactions to the distancing from the world caused by rationalistic, mechanistic and dichotomous ways of thinking. They can both be regarded as politics of experience that are based on a field perspective, proposing a conception of existence and construction of sense as temporal process that cannot be dissociated from experience in the world, a conception about our existential condition as being-in-the-world-with-the-other. Accordingly, temporality, embodiment and alterity are fundamental dimensions for thinking about existence and the way in which senses and meanings[1] emerge, how they are communicated and how they are involved in the way we perceive and act. Conceiving it as a process that originates in the situation, within the scope of original indifferentiation, involved with intersubjectivity and intercorporeality, Merleau-Ponty offers the possibility of a fruitful dialogue involving discussion of the concept of the "Id of the situation" and its implications in our clinical practice.

1. We will use the words *sense* and *meaning* interchangeably

As a philosopher who combats the idea of a "God's-eye view"[2] and understands that philosophy must be incarnated in the world, Merleau-Ponty directs his work to considering embodiment – an engaged body in situation with the world – as the origin of sense. It is within this condition of being a body in a world with the other that sense can be apprehended in its nascent state. According to Merleau-Ponty, the sense that arises from the intersection of the paths of my various experiences with those of others is inseparable from intersubjectivity and temporality, as "the phenomenological world is not the bringing to explicit expression of a pre-existing being, but the laying-down of being" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, P. XX). This implies that phenomenology must search for the sense of mundane experiences, where such sense is born, abandoning idealistic or logicistic thinking that takes truth to be a logical category, a pre-existing essence given in the world of pure ideas.

The consequences of such thinking are many, but for now, we highlight the fact that, by occupying a place of importance beside rational thinking's superior functions, perception, the body, and the sensitive dimension of experience defy the hegemony of a rationally "thinking Ego". This calls into question the very possibility of clarity, objectivity, and transparency when comprehending the world and existence. Our body is in the world, inserted amid things, interlaced with them; thus, we cannot have a God's-eye view of it. On the contrary, the perspective one can have as a body-subject is always partial and incomplete, as it is invariably given within the world, in temporal movement, in historicity and in the intersubjective relationship with other perceptual bodies that compose the situation.

The contact process as described by Perls and Goodman is very similar to the phenomenological understanding of consciousness as intentionality and temporality. To think of contact as *awareness* of the field or as a motor response to the field (PHG, p. 44) first implies a field perspective: The process of awareness is a spontaneous configuration that emerges from the organism/environment field, or the field of presence, as called by phenomenology. In this temporal flux of our experience in the world with the other, forms are configured and unfold into successive figures, which is how we perceive the world, how it shows itself and makes sense to us. Similarly to the phenomenological notion of intentionality, awareness is this temporal process of configuring forms that organize the field, in which no part takes precedent over another, and there is no determination of any kind. Furthermore, such sense is also not determined externally. It is a

2. Translator's Note: The original expression in French is "pensée de survol," which literally translates to "overflight thought." In English, the term used is "God's-eye view," which refers to a view from above, which sees all, alluding to Cartesian thought.

phenomenon of the field, given spontaneously in the contact experience as a process of discovering-and-inventing.

Laura Perls refers to contact as an activity with a given rhythm of contacting and then letting flow, an activity that implies accepting and dealing with the other and experiencing oneself in this movement between me and the other (Perls L. 1992). The encounter with the different other surprises me and summons a movement toward regaining equilibrium, which is a creation of sense, creative adjustment before what is different or new.

Thinking along these lines, we conceive life as movement, rhythm, a compass that is marked in the field of presence: me-body in the presence of the world and of the other-body, interwoven, side by side, identity and difference. In this living movement of contact, which takes place in the organism/environment field, a singular way of being in the world begins to take shape, a way of perceiving, a motor style: a way of walking, seeing, talking, listening, and moving, capable of expression and transformation. A sense of oneself in the world is created and re-created as embodiment, a process that Távora (2014) called "*selfing*".

The use of the term in the gerund form, as proposed by the author, seems to me a very interesting way to indicate that Gestalt therapy is opposed to understanding self as a noun, a being, a fixed institution, conceiving this notion as a verb, action, temporal unfolding. Thus, Gestalt thought emphasizes what is happening in the field of presence and defines the "self" as a contact-system, or as functions that are activated when in the presence of difference, to promote creative adjustment, an infinite task that is always starting over.

The self-function is temporal: "the function of contacting the actual transient present" (PHG, p. 149). In this sense, we understand that the self only exists when in contact, within the organism/environment field. We exist as beings in a situation (being-in-the-world) before differentiating ourselves as individuals, and *being engaged with the situation* is a property of the self-function. i.e., the self function is a function of the field of presence. If there is no novelty in the field, we are integrated into it and what is happening is harmonious with the past and future.

Having a new or different experience implies certain imbalance, understood here as a shift or breakdown in the temporal structure of the lived field. What is happening now cannot be integrated into a lived past and an expected future, it doesn´t make sense, representing a situation that seems to be nonsense. Creative adjustment is a movement toward reestablishing equilibrium by creating meaning, i.e., an attempt to integrate the novelty into our temporal horizons.

The starting point of the self-function as this movement of creative adjustment is forecontact, described by Perls, Hefferline and Goodman as follows: "The body is the ground, the appetite or environmental stimulus is the figure. This is what is aware as the 'given' or Id of the situation, dissolving into

its possibilities" (PHG, p. 182). In another passage, the authors state: "On being excited by a novelty, the self dissolves *the given* (of both the environment and the body and its habits) into possibilities and from them creates a reality. The reality is a passage from past to future: This is what exists and this is what the self is aware of, discovers and invents" (PHG, p. 184). Here, the authors declare the temporal structure of the self-contact-system. The Id is the given ground dissolving itself into possibilities, the ego is the progressive identification with possibilities (future) and the act of creating based on these possibilities.

The Id of the Situation

As stated above, the starting point of the contact process is forecontact. This can be described as a fluid state, the indifferentiation of I-world. This state is a layer of raw meaningful experiences that contains needs, appetites, organic arousal, unfinished situations, images of oneself, habits of loyalty and where there is dispersion: the experience diluted in the field, i.e., an undifferentiated background of possibilities. The Id function of the self-contact-system is, thus, pre-reflexive, given as a configuration of the organism/environment field. This means conceiving contact as a process that unfolds itself based on an originary state of subject-world indifferentiation.

The "Id of the situation" is a term that occurs only once in the book *Gestalt Therapy*, but which draws attention to an idea implicit in the conception of the Id function of the self-system: The idea that the Id "belongs" to the situation, not to the subject. In the development of Gestalt therapy, Jean-Marie Robine was the first author to emphasize and discuss this notion, giving it a place of importance within Gestalt therapy theory. This idea has also been incorporated and explored by other contemporary authors. In Perls, Hefferline and Goodman's book, the term appears with a phrase that is more like a clue for thinking about the notion of the Id of the situation: "the given", a term that reappears many other times in the text. Therefore, the idea of the Id of the situation refers explicitly to *the given in a situation.* This notion will be develop here based on the theory of self as a whole in dialogue with the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty.

As I see it, the idea of the Id of the situation sets forth a revolutionary proposal that tears down an intrapsychic, subject-centered conception, giving rise in psychology to another one, based on the intersubjective and intercorporal domains. The term "Id", first introduced in psychology by Georg Groddeck, comes from the German impersonal pronoun "es," which refers to that which is undetermined, obscure, unfamiliar to the I. Groddeck defines the Id as a vital force that conditions our existence, in the sense that, according to him, the subject cannot be free, as he is not isolated from his context, carrying with him

the marks of its own history (Santos, 2013). According to Santos, Groddeck sought to overcome body/mind dualism by stating that "Id" generates body and mind, "and can be a conceptual tool for thinking about the determining role that relationships as a whole play in psychic and somatic processes" (op. cit. p. 454). Freud adopts and modifies Groddeck's idea, establishing the Id as a psychic entity, "a psychic id, unknown and unconscious, on whose surface rests the ego" (Freud, 1923), employing it in a metapsychological sense and associating the unconscious as the source and origin of sense.

As I understand it, when Gestalt therapy sets forth the notion of the Id of the situation, it establishes its opposition to the idea of the Id as a profound, intrapsychic, entity on which the ego rests. Instead, Gestalt proposes that the Id belongs to the situation, a state of indifferentiation, an articulation of the field. Here, the idea of indetermination and impersonality persists; however, indetermination is displaced from the inside, the subjective and profound, to the situation. "What is given", in the philosophical sense, is that which presents itself to consciousness as immediate, not constructed or elaborated; i.e., it is what configures itself spontaneously in the field.

We are in the realm of perception, intentionality, and awareness, analogous modes of referring to the prereflexive and antepredicative processes of production of meaning. How can we truly understand these notions, when we live in a Western tradition of thought oriented by a predominately rationalistic way of thinking, which nurtures the solipsistic illusion that we are a closed off "I" and that our thoughts and world are private spheres of experience? Here, we must briefly resort to phenomenological discussions in order to broaden our comprehension of this fundamental idea that the Id of the situation is an originary state of indifferentiation that is the basis of contact, the experience in the world with the other, the central aim of this discussion. At this point, philosophy and psychology converge on the issue of subject and sense. More broadly, the problem at issue in this discussion involves thinking about how sense and signification (and re-signification) of things and of existence itself occurs, how it is produced, if there is a universal dimension at the basis of the production of sense, and if so, in what dimension it occurs, how society, culture and history are involved there, what tensions are established between singularity and universality, between me and the other, between consciousness and unconsciousness.

Phenomenology puts forward a conception based on intentionality and intersubjectivity, seeking to recover the consciousness-world relationship in the process of emergence of sense. The notion of intentionality implies "in the direction of" and is a quality of consciousness involved with perception and the emergence of the world, as well as the formation of figures and the birth of sense in the field of experience. This is a proposal that intends to overcome the

intellectualist conception inaugurated by the Cartesian tradition. For Merleau-Ponty, intellectualism defines the truth of existence in terms of the thought of existing and through signification. It disregards the objective world, the other and the body, as well as history. Therefore, existence situated in time and space is neglected in favor of the ideality of eternal significations and the problem of the other ceases to exist, as both I and the other, ego and alter, are one and the same in the world of the ultimate truth of ideas (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

Husserl developed a path in the phenomenological tradition leading away from transcendental subjectivity toward intersubjectivity forged in the lifeworld, or *Lebenswelt*, and introduced history and temporality as fundamental elements for thinking about a universal field in the origin of sense. However, as understood by Merleau-Ponty, Husserl did not abandon the desire for an apodictic, indubitable, clear and transparent truth to consciousness. Merleau-Ponty criticizes Husserl's intent of a "universal constitution, in which all of the world's obscurities are elucidated" (op. cit, p. 364) and proposes a mundane phenomenology, based on unreflective experience, in which there is no reflexive clarity, but a clarity that originates from perceptual evidence, which he called "perceptual faith". He stated: "The world is not what I think, but what I live through" (op. cit. P. xviii). For Merleau-Ponty, seeking the essence of the world "is looking for what it is as a fact for us, before any thematization" (op. cit., P. xvii). Reflection occurs based on what is unreflected, "It has to recognize, as having priority over its own operations, **the world which is given** to the subject" (op. cit., P. x). In this passage he postulates an idea that is fundamental throughout all his work: it is the experience of the world, the prereflexive or unreflected, that sustains reflection. In other words, all reflection must recognize that before its operation there is a world given to the subject and our life is supported by *the given*. In other words, the sense of life and existence is not actively produced through reflection; rather, it must be based on mundane experience, which offers us another type of comprehension, a sensitive comprehension.

Thus, he postulates the primacy of perception, proposing that it is the origin of meaning and defining it as a process that does not belong in the subject's interior, but as something given in the scope of this originary subject-world indifferentiation. He postulates the body as how we are inserted in the world and the notion of situation as the intermingling body-world, in which two dimensions of the body are implied (*Ibid.*). The first is the habitual dimension: Habit is what has already been acquired and incorporated by the organism, becoming automatized, taken for granted, taking on the status of the non-personal and general. This dimension is expressed by impersonal pronoun "one" in English, expressing the action of an undetermined subject (such as in the phrase "if one wants to succeed, one should study hard") indicating that this action extends to all. Thus, engagement with the mundane situation occurs

through the habitual dimension of the body, generating a feeling of belonging to the world. Merleau-Ponty referred to this habitual dimension of the body as the belonging to the realm of the anonymous or quasi-impersonal, since it belongs to all and no one specifically. The prefix "quasi" in the expression "quasi-impersonal" points to a fundamental point: Habit is not a reflexive automatism, it is marked by a unique way of being, as it was constructed based on my personal dimension in a previous present, was assimilated and became past. This description is similar to the physiological dimension described by Perls and Goodman, predominant in the forecontact phase, when the self-system functions in the Id modality, a theme that we will come back to at a later time in our discussion.

The second dimension of the body proposed by Merleau-Ponty is the personal one. The personal sphere appears when something emerges from this silent background of habit, unfolding itself in a movement of creation, which for him defines the notion of freedom as *praxis*, a work of creation that differentiates and personalizes us. This idea is very similar to the description of the ego function of the self-contact-system.

Thus, I argue that the Id of the situation is a state of indifferentiation at the origin of contact, when, as a habitual body, we are engaged and in sync with the world. This state characterizes a type of adherence to the sensitive world shared by all. It is only through the ego function that some differentiation occurs and an outline of a personal dimension is drawn, due to a progressive identification with the possibilities. The movement of freedom is a spontaneous action (ego function) in response to the demands of the situation itself, to that which is given in the field and urges a movement of differentiation and creation.

Id of the Situation, Habit and Physiology

The idea of habit is central to this discussion about the Id of the situation. This notion emerges when Perls and Goodman describe forecontact as follows: "From the beginning and throughout, on being excited by a novelty, the self dissolves the given (of both the environment and the body and its habits) into possibilities" (PHG, p. 184). Thus, corporal habit forms the Id of the situation and the ulterior task consists of transforming these habits through the work of the self. In discussions regarding post-contact, habit is described as one of the consequences of creative adjustment, one of the possible names for growth: assimilation, learning, memory, habit, imitation, and others. What underlies all of them "is a certain unification or made-identity in the organism/environment interaction" (op. cit., p. 200). What distinguishes them is the type of novelty which is directed to and transforms. When contact occurs through

incorporation, like eating, the process is called assimilation. When contact occurs through proximity or touch, such as in perception and love, it is called identification. Regarding habits, the authors stated: "Habits are 'picked up from' our behavior in company, we have imitated or identified with the others, and formed our personalities on their model," (*Ibid.*) attributing to habit a status intimately connected to the social. "Habit of loyalty" is an identification with social groups, such as language, morality and rhetorical attitudes, which becomes a source of power for action.

Perls, Hefferline and Goodman stated that consummated growth is an unaware process, conceiving the passage from conscious contact to unaware assimilation as a passage from the psychological to the physiological. This choice displays the influences of Gestalt psychology and psychoanalysis, each in their own way. Perls and Goodman criticized two aspects of psychoanalysis fundamental to our discussion: the conception of the ego as passive and the unconscious as mental, which resulted in a division of the psyche. They questioned why Freud would have called the unconscious mental, a choice that resulted in other subdivisions, such as the conscious-mental, preconscious-mental and unconscious-mental, in addition to the somatic. For these authors, the problem could have been solved without resorting to divisions by adopting the point of view defended by the psychology of form, namely that phenomena appear as totalities, for the notion of meaningful wholes applies to the physical, the body or the mind, without distinction. As the whole explains the parts, they considered it a mistake for Freud to have split the mental from the physical, the unconscious from the conscious.

When they choose to label passing and transitory contact with novelty – a task attributed to the self functioning in the ego modality – as psychological, and label "the conservative, the nonaware, self-regulation, whether inherent or learned" (op. cit., p. 206) as physiological, the authors circumscribe the psychological as the ego function and classify all the rest as physiological, including the Id function. This seems to be how they overcame the problems they had observed in psychoanalysis, by conceiving an ego function that takes on a protagonist role in a creating dimension and reintegration of the unconscious dimension to the conservative sphere.

The Id of the situation and habit from the perspective of temporality

Based on the dialogue that I have been establishing with phenomenology, I have found Merleau-Ponty's discussions about temporality to contain interesting contributions when considering these issues. From the temporal perspective, I

understand post-contact as a passage from the present to the past, from that which is actual to that which is habitual. This passage results in a reintegration of the self/ego into the background, here considered as the temporal flux of being in the world, implying losing oneself to the past , while opening up to time and the future.

The description of final-contact as "selfforgetful" as I understand it, announces the beginning of this return to the condition of being in the world as non-personal, as indifferentiation. It is the apex of contact, in which there is no self and world, but integration into a figure with no background, an "(...) experience of aesthetic-erotic absorption, when spontaneous awareness and muscularity drink in and dance in the environment as if self-oblivious (...)" (op. cit., p. 37). Such selfforgetfulness is a fleeting moment of being absorbed in the figure, when the following moment is being prepared for, in which I detach from what I know as "myself," from this ego-subjectivity. It will then become past, and I can again open myself up to the situation, engaged with the flux of being-in-the-world. "Contact is spontaneously transitory. The self works for its completion, but not for its perpetuation" (op. cit., p. 224), which characterizes Gestalt therapy as "aesthetics of the ephemeral" (Robine, 2012), as Robine proposed to describe it.

According to Merleau-Ponty, being in the world is temporality itself, the "pulsation of existence" that unites psychological and physiological, actuality and habit, culture and nature. As a being of indivision it must be distinguished from: a) objectivity, *res extensa* or the third person; and b) *res cogitans*, idea or the first person (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). We are part of this pulsation, engaged as a body with the situation. At times, this occurs as a presence and actuality, i.e., a singular and personal experience; at others, as past, i.e., general and non-personal. The habitual dimension expresses a form of the body with ballast in the past, or in Gestalt terms, in something that has been assimilated and is now part of the ground. It is this habitual past or ground that sustains the current dimension of experience - the actual body that addresses the world with its motor spontaneity, creating and re-signifying, and renovating habit.

The ground, or the habitual body, is not only physiological, a point that I wish to underscore. More important than whether it is physiological or psychological, it is being-in-the-world, interhuman or intersubjective, a dimension formed by sedimented habits and customs, ideological formations and cultural objects that we produce through our human creations and that are sedimented in the impersonal background in the form of impersonal habits. They present themselves as quasi-impersonal through our embodiment, our body gestures, and our way of perceiving things, intrinsic to our ways of being and existing in the world. On discussing the organism/environment field, Perls, Hefferline and Goodman emphasized the intrinsic force behind this social dimension "(...)

historical and cultural factors cannot be considered as complicated or modifying conditions of a simpler biophysical condition, but are intrinsic in the way any problem is presented to us." (PHG, p. 5)

Being in the world is temporality; existence is the intermingling of generality and singularity. In order for me to love someone singularly, I must first belong to the world of love, and each time that I love someone singularly, I broaden the possibilities of this general world of love as the expression, through my actions, of this singular form of loving, which soon after is no longer just mine and becomes part of the world of love. These different forms of love become part of society, part of ideology; one or several of them can become the dominant ideology expressed through various cultural objects which can involve, for example, power, domination, freedom, love free of gender, race and cultural issues. Thus, "my" way of loving is renewed every day, slowly modifying itself, almost imperceptibly, while still maintaining a singular style of being in the form of love that is inseparable from the general world of love.

This general world is an intersubjective dimension in which I am unaware of my engagement with the habitual dimension of the body, the general world is an open temporal horizon, in which sedimented ideological forms are renewed based on the human work of creation, which produces sense, utensils, tools, language, art, etc. based on our capacity for expression. This world in movement and transformation includes me, it is a complexity of which I am part and does not present itself to me in a complete and finished manner; thus, it is impossible to apprehend it completely. This is why, as stated by Merleau-Ponty, I cannot have a God's-eye view of the world and perceive it as an object. Notwithstanding, I can feel it. From inside it, I suffer silent affections (pathos) that unbalance me and demand of me a movement of creation.

Thus, we emphasize some elements that we have set forth to characterize the notion of the Id of the situation:

- The Id of the situation is a state of originary indifferentiation that precedes the differentiation of an ego-subject and, therefore, can be considered pre-personal, anonymous or quasi-impersonal.
- The ground is the habitual body, an acquired past, through which we engage with the world.
- As an originary dimension and undifferentiated ground, it belongs simultaneously to everyone (as a generality) and to no one (as a particularity), characterizing an intersubjective dimension.
- It presents itself spontaneously, as "the given". That which is given in the situation presents itself as difference or novelty, it is not determined and cannot be made objective; it can only be felt.
- It is precisely *this* that *is given* as an articulation of the field, and which is *aware*, emerging in the form of feeling and affection, which characterizes

the Id of the situation and summons me as motor spontaneity (ego function) to a subsequent movement of signifying, creating.

Thus we can conclude that the Id of the situation is the originary source of sense, expressing that our existence is engaged, it is being-in-the-world. Our personal existence is inseparable from the world in general, which is temporality and, therefore, a horizon and openness to possibilities.

This is a notion that deviates from the conception of the subject as a closed-off subjectivity, an "I" accessible only to itself, whether as a thinking-ego or as a hostage of unconscious determinism. It is an idea that blurs the boundaries of closed subjectivities and instead considers the subject as intersubjectivity and temporality, thus also allowing for the notion of intercorporeality.

On stating that engagement in the world takes place as an unaware habitual dimension, we are not postulating an unconscious as the origin. On the contrary, we are stating that "*what is aware as the 'given' in the field*" is the source of the contact process. This implies a type of consciousness that is immediate and implicit knowledge of the field, as defined by Robine (Robine, 2006). It is knowledge of the experience that is not reflection, clear and transparent thought, but the truth of the situation that is given through spontaneous feeling and excitement.

Our first comprehension of the world that presents itself through the here and now experience is given through feeling, it is a corporeal dimension. We first understand the world as a lived body before representing it, without subordinating our lived experience to symbolic or objectifying functions. The notion of awareness means knowledge that is produced through experience, when we are sensitively affected and gesture toward something that is connected to the dominant need in a given the situation, in the present field of here and now, and which then becomes the figure. The "sensing" dimension of awareness, as I proposed in a previous work (Alvim, 2014), involves being open to being affected by novelty. This type of openness is not an active or voluntary act; rather, it is inherent in being engaged with the situation, in which "there is no sense of oneself or of other things other than one's experience of the situation" (PHG, p. 155). As I see it, this state of engagement with the situation encompasses a certain degree of passivity, understood here as acceptance, availability and openness to that which is new and different. Perls and Goodman stated that "the sense of passivity comes from the act of accepting without engagement" (op. cit., p. 159), i.e., without clinging to what has gone and accepting what is to come. Larrosa discussed the idea of experience and stated that living an experience involves being affected by something that happens to us: "Experience is what we go through, what happens to us, what touches us" (Larossa, 2014, p. 18), a sense expressed in several languages, all of them containing nuances of passivity: " (..) Ce qui nous arrive (...), quello che nos succede ou quello che

nos accade (...), that what is happening to us (...), was mir passiert". According to Tarossa, it implies a type of passivity that precedes the opposition between active and passive; it is passivity in the sense of passion (*pathos*), suffering. The middle mode indicates that selfing and awareness are spontaneous processes, which means that the process of figure formation given through awareness is a spontaneous one, equidistant from the extremes of activity and passivity.

This conception is of essential importance to understanding that our relationship with the world and others cannot be based on a dichotomous way of thinking, in which the other and I are conceived as two absolutely separate individuals who relate as parts that are external to one another (parts external to parts) and who are governed by a type of relationship in which we are either passive or active with regard to the other. Our relationship with the other involves indifferentiation and differentiation, contact and withdrawal as a dance of communality and difference.

The Id of the Situation as an Intersubjective and Intercorporal Dimension: Implications for Therapy

With the other, we share dimensions interwoven in embodiment: a physiological dimension of the body; an ontological condition of being a body that sees and is seen, feels and is felt; and a temporal condition as sociohistorical subjects that is at the basis of habits and expressive gestures. The intersubjective dimension is lived as intercorporeality[3], for it presents itself through embodiment as a common way of perceiving and feeling. We share ways of feeling in situations of violence, love, birth, death, sadness, and joy; we share corporal and gestural forms sedimented in our culture in the form of an anonymous ground. These are forms that are at the basis of our own unique forms of feeling which, when expressed, bring the marks of our own personal style. It is crucial to remember that what we call intersubjectivity is not collective consciousness. It involves a living relationship and tension, as it´s a dimension which cannot be separated from subjectivity as singularity that creates, generating difference and movement in the field.

Thus, the experience of the other is also tension, difference and strangeness. This experience decenters us, causing unbalance, and requires an effort of creative adjustment. The other is my equal: Like me, he is a body that appears to me differently than inanimate objects. I see that, through his body, the other directs himself toward this world which I had considered as my own private

3. Merleau-Ponty (2000) referred to intercorporeality as a general way of feeling, as a "Sentient in general".

world; I experience cold and see the other moving closer to the fire to get warm, I feel sadness before a present occurrence and see the eyes of the other filled with tears. It is the other who, with his animate body, shows me that the world is not reduced to my subjectivity, for he also addresses the world that I see and address.

In short, before such an experience with *what is different* generates such a polarization, the other and I share one ground, an intersubjective dimension which can be experienced as intercorporeality. From this ground we differentiate ourselves as singular subjects/egos and then again after resuming this state of indifferentiation. This is a movement of infinite temporalization, a flux from the present to the future – in which we create – and from the present to the past – in which what was created is assimilated and returns to the ground as habit.

In neurosis, the present time has been "occupied" in a certain way by habit that does not update itself here and now based on that which presents itself. It remains fixated, preventing us from perceiving what is happening and obliterating our temporal horizons and creation. Habit can become a fixed form in the context of someone with a history marked by distinct occurrences, such as, for example, traumatic situations. However, it can also take place in the context of introjection of sedimentations originating in the social world. When these take up all the space of existence, they characterize a mechanical life condition, controlled by external determinants.

Gestalt therapy describes neurosis as a chronic emergency situation, which points to a desensitization of the body. This consists of a tense corporal state that hinders the flow of excitement, impairing sensing as openness and affection. Furthermore, there is a break in spontaneous mind, body and world integration in the field, with distancing of the present experience and of the reality of the situation of interacting with the world and the other. Habit, a past form that ideally would always be updating itself based on the present situation, is not updated anymore. It is fixated as a past form that remains in the present, taking up time-space of the creating dimension and preventing temporal flux. Gestalt therapy states that in neurosis, the ego function of the self is lost to a secondary physiology. The excitement that moves us to invent is anaesthetized, the body acts mechanically, disconnected from the situation.

In this state, our experience of the other is reduced. Sometimes I see the other based on my imagination or fantasies. At other times, I see the other as a simple representation. Even though this representation was constructed in a past situation in which I interacted concretely with him, he is now represented in my thoughts as an idea. In both cases, the other is excluded from my experience, he is a projection screen for my fantasies or representations. In this sense, it's as if the other was not present, and I am not open to being affected by his difference and dealing with what comes. Resentment can be understood as a reiteration of a past feeling that, as a passive experience, occupies the place of present activity

(Debenedetti & Fonseca, 2009). In this situation, there is no openness to the future in the sense of that which is still to be discovered-and-invented. The temporal sense of possibility, trust before the new, faith in the situation and the other, and confident movement toward inventing the future are lost. We can understand neurosis as an attempt to stop time. In this context, excitement does not flow from the ground of the situation to form a figure, temporality does not flow, and awareness is not a flux.

From this perspective, the work of therapy is to recover the hindered temporal flux and allow for the reopening of horizons and contact with the present reality, which includes the other. The therapeutic situation involves therapist and client composing a field of experience here-and-now. In therapy, there is an encounter with the different other, there is a boundary experience, there is contact as creative adjustment, (the task of the self-contact-system), movement that involves indifferentiation and differentiation, openness and closure. Considered as a politics of experience, I understand that Gestalt therapy cannot forgo, in the clinical situation, a relationship with the other based on embodiment, experience and non-reflexive knowledge. The task at hand in psychotherapy involves a flux of form creation (the self-function, as a movement of becoming, unfolding), a process of sense creation that constitutes itself fleetingly and ephemerally.

Thus, our work in clinical practice must be based on the Id of the situation, on this common ground in which the sum of therapist and client is more than two people as parts external to parts. We are beings-in-the-world, engaged with the temporal flux of mundane existence. The therapist is not a specialist that sees the other as an object to be analyzed, he is a human being relating to another human being. It is based on our own presence, engaged with the therapeutic situation with acceptance, availability and openness that we are able to gain access to that which is common, thus sharing a common ground of humanity that we both inhabit and in which we can belong and feel at home. It is this feeling of belonging that provides support so that the client (and also the therapist) can risk contacting the difference presented by the other and be affected and flowing with their own movement of differentiation.

Cecilia was a young orphan girl who lived alone in a city with only the financial support of a close relative that lived far away. Her only relationships were with some childhood friends, and establishing new contacts caused her much anguish; she always felt very inadequate. Slowly, we realized that she related with others through a very intense imagination through which she presumed and feared everything that would happen. To her, others were a product of the imagination and their presence was source of great anxiety. She always spoke based on concepts, rationally. Her openness to feeling and to the

other was practically inexistent; she could not display sadness or fragility, for she was afraid of seeming vulnerable and being hurt. In our work together, we needed to very slowly find a common ground. In order for us to construct a pathway back to this ground, I had to accept, in the first place, that we would remain in a place where she could stay and my work with her did not involve classic questions about feelings. Instead, I had to welcome her predominately rational way of functioning as a personality and discuss her concepts, ideas, daydreams. In order for a common ground to arise from that relationship, within the limits of what was possible, time was needed. In one session soon after Mother's Day, we had a memorable encounter. On that day, on observing deep sadness in her eyes while speaking of her mother, I got up and sat down beside her on the couch, taking her in my arms, while she burst into compulsive tears. She cried for the absence of her mother. I had lost my mother the previous year and, in contact with her, also cried, in silence. We stayed there for a long time.

This encounter, which occurred in realm of the sensitive, cannot be reduced to a rational reflection. Sensing occurs in the here and now experience of the situation and provides us only with unreflected knowledge, a type of slippery, elusive consciousness such as that proposed by Husserl in his discussions about empathy. It is only within the relationship with the other that I can move on from this slippery consciousness, the elusive sense of possibility, to the concreteness of what I feel. When someone else's gestures signals to something that I feel, "suddenly there breaks forth the evidence that yonder also, minute by minute, life is being lived" (Merleau-Ponty, 1958, p. 22) and that what I feel is not a weakness of mine, it is worthy of being felt, it has a place in the world, it is human. Cecília was afraid of crying in front of another person, of demonstrating weakness or fragility, of being judged. There, as I took her in my arms, I met with Cecília on the commonality of "being a daughter" and "being a mother", connecting with her through the pain of absence and, at the same, connecting with the dimension of motherly care, as the mother that I am. Bringing to that moment my possibility of taking care of her, as a therapist, I was also supported by the human dimension of "being a mother in the form of care". In the silence of that moment, the essential material bond that she had lost was made concrete as a possibility still alive today, in the human inter-world, in the present time.

When I observe the other seeing what I see, moving like I do, toward the same point of the world to which I move, an "I" emerges concretely in time and space. This operation is not reflexive, but esthesiological. I cannot access the thoughts of another, I will never know what the other is thinking, but I can see what he sees, see his vision, his eyes grasping the same things that mine do.

This encounter with the other, which takes place in the realm of the sensitive, through the silent gesticulation of bodies, "ensures" that I feel belonging in the same world. Sensing here is not understood as a reaction (passive), but as a state of being co-present with things. When dealing with the theme of empathy (Einfühlung), Merleau-Ponty stated: "The whole riddle of Einfühlung lies in its initial, 'esthesiological' phase; and it is solved there because it is a perception (...) It is never a matter of anything but co-perception (...) The fact is that the sensitive, which announces itself to me in my strictly private life, addresses a whole other corporeality through my own" (Merleau-Ponty, 1954, p. 70).

Thus, intercorporeality points to the possibility of communication without reflection, which is given by perception and sensing, in adherence to and engagement in the world. I understand that it is within the scope of an intercorporeal experience that therapy can support the creation of sense regarding one's existence in the world. Based on co-presence, in an intermediary mode between activity and passivity, therapeutic dialogue needs to occur between bodies, from the Id of the situation. In other words, it emerges from that which is given here and now, in a raw state, in the process of differentiation, the visible emerging from a ground of invisibility, still anonymous, yet present and sensitive. Through my own engagement as a sensitive body in the situation, I invite the other as a body to take part in the sensitive present. This occurs based on an aesthetic experience.

Robine postulates working with the awareness of the situation, proposing that intentionality constitutes the emergence of a figure and, consequently, is related to the Id of the situation (Robine, 2015). As has been stated, intentionality implies "in the direction of", and it is a quality of consciousness involved with the perception and presentation of the world, with the formation of a figure and the spontaneous emergence of sense from the field of experience. I cannot see the intentionality of the other as an observer, for if I could, the other would be an object to me; neither can I do so as a contemplator who sits in pure passive expectation. I can, however, accompany the other's movement if I can connect with him in sharing this sensitive dimension, engaged with the situation and feeling with him. The affirmation that Gestalt therapy is guided by aesthetic criteria goes far beyond an aesthetic judgement based on rationality and objectivity that looks at the created form as an object seen from the outside. Rather, it implies an aesthetic experience defined as that given in the realm of the sensitive. In this way, I can perceive weak figures, false conflicts and, over all, feeble signs of what is dominant in the situation. As a therapist, being aware of what is given is to connect with the dominance of the situation and to guide the therapeutic intervention based on our sensitive perception, which shows us a figure that is spontaneously being formed in the field, as illustrated below:

Marcela talks about very sad things involving family issues. When she speaks, she has a big smile on her face and it confuses me. I ask her what she is feeling when in contact with that issue and she replies that she is confused, feeling sadness that she cannot see, it feels like the sadness runs away every time its perceived. I share with her the confusion I also feel in that moment, including in my description of the situation her smiling face as something that contributes to the confusion that I feel. The smile becomes her focus: She tells me about being ever aware of having in fact a beautiful and big smile that has opened doors for her; of the ideology preached to her repeatedly by her father that displaying sadness is vulnerability and must be avoided; of how she has always rejected the idea of needing help. Marcela keeps on taking apart the pieces that kept that form fixated. In playful and creative movements, she puts pieces together and apart, recreating life and starting to integrate the sad expression on her face that addresses the world.

.....

Carlos often talks about wanting to be different from who he is. He has always been gawky and clumsy. One day, he talks of the shock experienced by a friend when she had lunch over at his house with his family. She felt uncomfortable with their insistence on calling him clumsy and telling stories his blunders. He tells me that and laughs. That laughter, enigmatic to me, stands out. I ask him "What is this laughter about?" to which he responds: "It's a sarcastic laugh. They're right, I really am a klutz! I'm a good-for-nothing! My family doesn't mean any harm by it, I know that they love me and say it in jest." I remain in silence, looking at him carefully and feeling unable to comprehend such a type of love, which does not fit into the world of love that I am familiar with. But I remain open, waiting. He notices my reaction and stops. Doubt takes over. We stay in silence for a long time, until he goes back to the scene of his friend's shock and sees in her, besides shock, a certain outrage. This serves as a starting point for him to begin questioning his family's critical ways and perceiving his own critical attitude towards himself. He also perceives how he is loving with his friends and how he is different from his family in this regard. He really likes that!

.....

Isabela tells me about an episode of family violence as if recounting a film she has watched at the movies. She laughs at the exaggerated scenes of broken objects, stomping, and her father's histrionic screaming when something does not go his way. I listen carefully. At a certain point, I feel intense sadness present in my experience of the situation. I share this feeling with her in a brief phrase and, as I speak, my eyes tear up. Isabela is lost, is disoriented, hesitates and leaves. The following week, she comes back and with much liveliness tells me that the image of my teared-up eyes had an impact on

her and led to intense contact with a feeling of sadness which helped her perceive how sad it all was and how deeply the family violence affected her. For the first time, Isabela is faced with the concreteness of her pain, which for many years had remained in the ground of her existence, diffuse and incomprehensible. The violence of her father, whom she loved and idealized so much, could now start to be integrated with the perception that she had of him. The sadness diluted itself in tears that she can now cry, spreading like dark ink over the portrait of her father, providing his figure with new outlines, which little by little become sharper and more real.

In the three clinical situations I presented, the starting point was the sensitive perception of something that was yet undetermined and impersonal – something present in the situation: a feeling of confusion, a sarcastic and enigmatic laugh, or silenced sadness. The therapist's interventions were guided by the awareness of what was given.

The source of excitement lies in contact. It is not in the profound domain of the I, nor is it given by a stimulus in the environment. Rather, it is rooted in the situation, in this common ground that we share when sensing as intercorporeality and that demands from us a movement of creation and expression.

In his article "Social Change Begins with Two", Robine stated that in order to maintain coherence with the field perspective and with the hypothesis that contact is the first experience, we must adopt the conception of primary indifference as a methodological principle. He declared:

> We have to set off again, methodologically speaking, from an initial undifferentiated situation – the famous creative undifferentiation" that Perls borrowed from Friedlander, which characterizes the field as a whole. The idea that the feeling or experience of the moment is immediately attributed to the person who expresses it falls under a theoretical prejudice. (op. cit., p. 211).

In this passage he emphasizes that sensation or experience cannot be attributed immediately to that which expresses it, lest individuation occur prematurely. In this sense, we must spend more time with the experience. Our work must be governed by an ethics of slowness and of waiting, which is not subject to chronological time, to the speed of the contemporary world. The pressure of ridding oneself of anguish must not influence it. In these times ruled by hedonistic logic, anguish has no place and demands to be quickly suppressed, rarely giving the person the opportunity to experience it as a motor of creation.

Gestalt therapy is a politics of experience, body and creation. It is a clinical practice guided by an ethic of alterity and transformation. Within this ethic,

sheltered in the common as an ethos or dwelling place, we can accept differences of the other and promote differentiation in the temporal movement of existence.

In the contemporary world, temporality as a reference for existence is subject to speed and chronological time, time of productivity. In this world, an ethic of slowness presents itself as a pressing need so that we can carry out our task as therapists and people engaged in the politics of trans-form-action.

What is given within the situation is silent communion, mute, shared through looks, gestures, or the gleam in one's eyes. This possibility of a meeting is frequently obscured by a rationality that wishes to define us, limiting our temporal structure and our condition as incarnated beings, placing us in the solipsistic loneliness of "I think". Being aware of the Id of the situation places us in the realm of sensing within a field of unreflected experience in the world with the other. This experience invites us to be available to hear the whispers of whatever is present in the field; we perceive the subtleties of the dominant signs present in the situation and listen, as Merleau-Ponty himself puts it, to the voices of silence which are expressed by an indirect language: a smile that never ends, a sad look, a pause, a conflict that sounds fake, or a tremor of the lips. These voices of silence then begin configuring silent senses, which demand from us a speaking word[4] as a creative and expressive movement.

Contact is transformation, re-creation of the senses of one's existence and of the world, a temporal process that is not based on subjectivity or reflection, but on the given. Our work consists of looking for movement, temporality; it is a work of resumption. As proposed by Merleau-Ponty, this is a resumption that should be fraternity with the world and not absolute creation. Such resumption has "the power to forget origins and to give the past not a survival, which is the hypocritical form of forgetfulness, but a new life, which is the noble form of memory." (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, p. 96)

Translated from Portuguese by Maya Bellomo Johnson

4. When Merleau-Ponty discusses expression and language, he makes a distinction between the speaking word and the spoken word. The speaking word is creative and institutes something new in the world.

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17.

Peter PHILIPPSON

Self and Other

But it is actually a question of fact, which may be formulated thus: Is the 'I' that we encounter in our consciousness made possible by the synthetic unity of our representations, or is it the 'I' which in fact unites the representations to each other? (Sartre, 1957: 34)

You see, you can look for the self. Does the 'self' exist? Does the 'I' exist? Can you dissect the brain and find the 'I', or the 'super-ego', or the 'self'? Definitely not. I think this is obvious. So what is this 'self'? Now the 'self' cannot be understood other than through the field, just like day cannot be understood other than by contrast with night. If there were eternal day, eternal lightness, not only would you not have the concept of a 'day', you would not even have the awareness of a 'day' because there is nothing to be aware of, there is no differentiation. So, the 'self' is to be found in the contrast with the otherness. (Perls, 1978: 55)

Introduction

The underlying assumption that this book makes meaningful is that, in some way, there is something important to be gained by attaching ideas of 'self' or 'consciousness' to human activity. Saying 'I am writing this' adds something to a description of fingers moving and altering electric impulses. We usually

understand these extras in terms of meaning, choice, intention, contacting, agency and similar ideas. Something meaningful is being done, whether that meaning arises from a created, purposeful universe, from a human being who is the 'measure of all things' (Protagoras in Lee, 2005: 250), or is emergent from the interaction. Different therapies (and, in the Gestalt field, different theorists and understandings) look at 'self' in all these different ways. I am excited, looking at the list of authors, at the potential for many of these understandings to be in this book.

In English, 'self' has an interesting usage. In some ways, the language captures the sense of reflexivity -'I spent some time with myself'. However, there is also a kind of paradox in the word 'myself' While people would generally assent to the idea that 'self' denotes some essence of who I am, the word 'my-self' implies a possessive pronoun to the self. Taken literally, self is something possessed by a 'me' who is not itself self. The use of pronouns in describing aspects of what I identify as mine is also instructive. In speaking about myself as a physical entity, I would (despite Fritz Perls' objections) use the impersonal pronoun 'it', and take 'it' as belonging to 'me'. The pronoun 'me' is the object of a sentence, used by me to speak about myself as an ongoing, identifiable, autonomous being who can be acted upon by the verb of the sentence. And 'I' is (or am) the subject of a sentence, the doer, able to be spontaneous and act without prior reflection ('I' without a need for the accompaniment of a 'me').

I want to approach the subject of self in Gestalt therapy in concentric circles, spreading from a basic idea, which is pointed to by the quotes from Sartre and Perls above.

The basic idea

The way I like to describe Perls' intuition is to say that there are two kinds of words. There are 'thing' words, 'table', 'human body', solid things you can touch or otherwise sense (though it is interesting to note that the solidity is actually a description of a relational event, for example touching and feeling resistance–colour is a relationship with light and our visual receptors), and there are 'comparison' words like 'big' or 'small' or 'high' or 'low', where you only know the significance of one term by knowing what is being compared to (I am big compared to a mouse, small compared to a mountain). Perls is saying that 'self' is the second kind of word, always a comparison with 'other', and it is therefore a self/other configuration that is being spoken of rather than an 'objective' self. Sartre is saying something very similar, that the 'I' is the 'synthetic unity of our representations', the concept that emerges when we move from raw and passive experiencing (what PHG calls 'id') to active and

purposeful/intentional organising of the world, and of ourselves as part of that world (what PHG calls 'ego'). Strictly speaking, there is no 'I' in id functioning. You could see it as a purely physical 'rubbing up against' at a sensitive boundary that registers the event as experience (but not yet 'my experience'). There is no meaning attached, it does not 'go' anywhere. Yet if we do not allow that first moment of meaninglessness and selflessness and move straight on to wants and needs (as some Gestalt approaches to 'id' do, see Philippson, 2001: 44-45), we are stuck in a world of conventional meaning and social determinism rather than being open to what arises in the actual situation (I will be pointing out the similarity of this to Husserl's thinking later in this chapter.)

A further implication of this understanding, which is clear in Sartre's formulation but not worked through in Gestalt theory, is that a continuous sense of selfhood is based at least as much on the relative continuity of a person's environment as on anything the person does 'inside' (though the person is involved in making an order out of their world, shaping their environment). When the world imposes a sudden change, the person's self is rocked just as much as their environment is rocked. So people who become refugees and asylum seekers (as my parents did) lose their sense of their ongoing selves. People whose children leave home, or whose loved-ones die, or lose their jobs suddenly, or are involved in a natural catastrophe (earthquakes, tsunamis, wars, ethnic cleansing) often go into shock and don't know who they are.

To quote Kurt Goldstein, with whom Fritz Perls worked in Berlin at the Institute for Brain-Damaged Soldiers:

> One could say that the environment emerges from the world through the being or actualization of the organism. Stated in a less prejudiced manner, *an organism can exist only if it succeeds in finding in the world an adequate environment* – in shaping an environment (for which, of course, the world must offer the opportunity). To have an environment, always presupposes a *given* organism. How could it then be determined by the environment? (Goldstein, 1939: 88, italics in original)

When we apply this perspective to psychotherapy, we get many interesting consequences. The therapist is not there to teach the client some better way of living, nor to 'attune' to some ongoing narrative of how their lives are or should be. In fact, it implies that the client whom the therapist engages with is emergent from the situation including the therapist, rather than being an objective self to be attuned to, and the therapist is similarly emergent. We are there in a joint laboratory where we can play with possibilities of engagement, to support the client who is stuck in these old narratives, including narratives of how to make themselves 'better'. The major requirement for the therapist is not

to be wise nor attentive, but contactfully playful, willing and able to co-inhabit many different relational spaces with the client. The problem with the narratives is that they replace our immediate experiencing of our being-now, and our moving-to-the-next. We are stuck in a small part of our possible life-world, and therapy opens a space in which new possibilities can emerge, what Perls called the 'safe emergency'. And with each space we co-create, we – both therapist and client – assimilate new possibilities of both the world and ourselves.

In any theory where 'self' is some essence of the person, the question is how therapy can change them. In this theory, self is inherently and gratifyingly changeable, and the question is now 'How does the sense of continuity arise, and when is it a support or a problem?' A major part of what brings people to therapy is a sense of a repeated situation where they react in familiar but unhelpful ways, or people respond to them in familiar and hurtful ways. They have a sense that they are doing something to make this happen, but it does not seem to help it not happen. They therefore usually conclude that they have a problem which is beyond their control and they need an expert to help them. It is very easy for the therapist to get caught in this conclusion, and to forget that we are also fallible human beings, who would not necessarily deal with the situation, with which the client comes, any better than the client. I want to introduce a model of what is happening, a model which is a restatement of the self theory in PHG but in a more consistent and usable form, in my view. It is also a model that connects well with the three pronouns 'it', 'I' and 'me' that I wrote about earlier.

Three boundaries of self formation

First of all, what is a boundary in Gestalt terms? It is not a 'wall' between two areas, but a process that both joins and differentiates the process on either side. For example, our skin both separates us from our environment, and connects us to it. It constantly renews itself through its permeable interactions on both sides of the boundary (blood supply, air, sunlight, moisture, shedding and replacement of skin cells). In the same way, the boundary between 'self' and 'other' is not fixed, but defines the moment-by-moment differentiation. This is another way of stating the basic idea. I will describe three boundaries that I understand to form self and other.

1. Organism/environment (It/not-it)

This is the physical boundary – the skin surface and the senses. The function of this boundary is *experience*, at a very primitive and wholly embodied level. As I have said above, there is no planning or sense of something I am doing, activity

is either passive or reflexive, using brain structures that human beings share with far simpler creatures. This is not yet 'my experience', and yet there is no possibility of more complex and organised functioning without this. It might seem strange to talk about an experience that is not 'mine', yet it is consistent with Sartre's view that it is the organising of experience that forms the self rather than vice versa. It might be useful to look at the logical error in Descartes' *cogito* ('I think therefore I am'). In making his premise 'I think', he has already assumed the 'I' who is thinking, and therefore proves nothing. Yet his argument can be rescued, for it is certainly true that *there is something going on*, and the more we doubt that, the more something (the doubting) is going on. I like to say that at this boundary, we are organs of perception of the field, not of the person. However, this field-experienced 'something' is the basis for the more complex emergent possibility of the second boundary, which I shall now introduce.

2. Self/other (I/not-I)

Now something new emerges from the experiences at the first physical boundary. It is now that there is purpose, intentionality, direction. Only now it is meaningful to say that I am contacting an other, and contact is the function of this boundary. It is important to repeat that it is not, in this view, the fact that a pre-existing 'I' comes out to take ownership. The emergent 'I' *is* the taking ownership. PHG talks about the *ego functions* of identification and alienation, and this is what we are seeing here. In fact, the ego functions are being used in two different ways. The first is the forming of a figure, bringing out some experience and making the rest background. The second is the identification of myself as the one who is aware and making contact, and the alienation of the figure as the other I am aware of and contacting. I actualize 'self' in relation to the other that I am now making figural, contacting, and often changing.

Of course this is circular. Yet it is not the circularity of a philosophical argument, as in Descartes' 'proof' that he exists. It is the circularity of what is called in complexity theory (Lewin, 1993) '*non-linearity*', the circularity of a car engine where the turning of the engine creates the activity that turns the engine. And we can immediately see a similarity between the car and a living creature. Both have two states, which we could see as alive and dead, both involving the same physical components. In one, the components are organised into their self-sustaining non-linear pattern, while in the other they are not interacting at all. Life is an organisation of matter, not something other than matter.

Body, for this second boundary, can be both identified as 'mine' or 'me', or alienated if it needs attention as a physical thing to be treated if injured, or even for part of it to be cut off if it threatens the whole (as in the case of cancer or gangrene). At the same time, I can identify something outside my body as 'me'. We regularly do that with our clothes, tennis players with their racquets,

samurai with their swords. Roger Federer doesn't think 'I'll now lift my racquet and move it this way', it is part of a whole-body movement (See Philippson, 2014: 201)

Both these two boundaries are of the moment, and they are not 'self-aware'. In the first, there is no self or only an instinctual 'proto-self' (Damasio, 1999), while in the second, that object of awareness is the other that is being contacted. We clearly need a third element to provide a sense of ourselves as continuing.

3. Personality boundary (Me/not-me)

PHG describes personality as "essentially a verbal replica of self; it is that which answers a question or a self-question" (PHG: 160). Personality is an assimilation, a self-image, bringing together experiences, decisions, commitments, genetic tendencies, physical possibilities and limitations into a picture which is coherent enough that we get a sense of 'who we are' in the world, how we do things, where and with whom. The function of this boundary is autonomy and self-knowledge. We do not have to reinvent the wheel at every step, but have assimilated a set of patterns which we can use in a variety of different situations. Human beings instinctually make patterns and meaning.

It is clear, I hope, from this description that personality is double-edged. The self-understanding and repeated patterns are able both to help us live less episodically and make ongoing relationships and commitments, develop values, careers and interests that are not available on a moment-by-moment basis. However, they can also make us inflexible, repeating ways of acting and relating that lead to familiar disappointment or pain. Yet we keep doing the same things for a number of reasons. Essentially, however painful or frustrating our sense of ourselves in the world, it provides a meaning to our lives and experiences. If we drop our sense of who we are, we find ourselves adrift in a sea of possibilities without any navigation tools to orient us. For some people with a reasonably secure attachment history, this moving to a new way of being in the world is exciting, and promises new opportunities and challenges. For people whose attachment was insecure or violent, the sea looks very threatening and dangerous. So Fritz Perls (1969) wrote about the 'Five Layers of Neurosis', and explained that behind the clichés and role-plays of fixed personality lay an impasse and an implosion, precisely this death of the familiar, which needs to be faced to allow the explosion, the emergence of a new way of living in the world.

For example, someone who was treated as bad and a nuisance in childhood can find their sense of who they are in their badness, either as a freedom to do whatever feels good, or as a stain to work to wash away. It does not make for a very connected life either way, but it serves it purpose, i.e. to make sense of who you are and what your life means, and also does not provide a support for taking steps to find something new.

The interconnection of the boundaries: non-linearity and attractors

I hope it is clear how the three boundaries interpenetrate. Personality would strongly influence the experiences at the physical id boundary, and the choices made at the ego or self-other boundary. What happens at those boundaries is part of what is assimilated into the personality. In fact, though I would support Sartre's critique of Husserl and others, in his insistence that self arises from the 'synthetic unity' of experiences, rather than being the primary organiser of experience, if we take the Gestalt line and say that self *is* the act of synthesising the experiences – the 'artist of life' to quote PHG – we can for all practical purposes put 'self' and experience in a non-linear, dialectical relation, each able to affect the other at every moment. In terms of the 'three boundaries' model, it is the question whether the first id boundary is within the description of self. One could equally well say that it is an aspect of the process before self emerges, or that it represents a consciousness of the field rather than being 'mine'.

The field of which we are an inseparable part is *non-linear*, and therefore has the effect of producing an emergent order. This is the world of chaos and complexity theories, which seem to me a vital part of this picture. In the last 40 years, these new, essentially mathematical, disciplines have produced startling insights into how the universe runs. They show how order can spontaneously arise out of chaos if there are feedback loops. The term 'attractor' was coined to visually show how such an order can be pulled back after being perturbed, but if the perturbation is sufficient, it can move to a new order (a new area of the attractor). Pendulum swings, weather patterns, evolutionary change and physiological processes are all subject to this kind of self-correcting non-linear activity.

> But physiologists have also begun to see chaos as health. It has long been understood that non-linearity in feedback processes serves to regulate and control. Simply put, a linear process, given a slight nudge, tends to remain slightly off track. A non-linear process, given the same nudge, tends to return to its starting point. Christian Huygens noticed one day that a set of pendulum clocks placed against a wall happened to be swinging in perfect chorus-line synchronization. Huygens surmised, correctly, that the clocks were coordinated by vibrations transmitted through the wood. (Gleick, 1987: 292-3)

It seems to me that a fine way to understand 'self' is as an 'attractor', a self-organising tendency that co-ordinates our activities within a certain area of possibility, and where nudges provided by circumstances will not in normal circumstances disrupt the organisation. Self is then capable of being both flexible and resilient, emergent yet an active part of the picture. It is difficult

to underestimate the significance of this new understanding. In the past, the inevitable intuition was that something complex had to come from something more complex, some 'Intelligent Designer'. Entropy, the 'running down' of the universe, was taken as a statement that the universe is getting less complex as time goes on. But now we know that entropy itself can drive 'dissipative structures' (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984) where complexity increases (as water flowing down a hill can drive a water wheel and do work). The world is complex and non-linear enough that we can *expect* the spontaneous emergence of order, as Smuts (1996/1926) pointed out: dust -> coalescence into stars and planets -> life -> intelligence and creativity. At no stage has a different level of reality entered the world, no Cartesian dualism, but a more complex organisation of the stuff of the universe with new capacities, in a similar way to how the interlinking of computers in the internet allows new capacities and possibilities, but no new form of reality is involved.

Considerations from philosophy

> Gestalt therapy is one of the rebellious, humanistic, existential forces in psychology which seeks to stem the avalanche of self-defeating, self-destructive forces among some members of our society. It is "existential" in a broad sense. All schools of existentialism emphasize direct experience, but most of them have some conceptual framework. Kierkegaard had his Protestant theology, Buber his Judaism, Sartre his communism, and Binswanger his psychoanalysis. Gestalt therapy is fully ontological in that it recognizes both conceptual activity and the biological formation of *Gestalten*. It is thus self-supporting and truly experiential. (Perls, 2012: 187)

I want to assert that the approach taken by Gestalt therapy is philosophically very fruitful, touching on many different philosophical questions and providing a satisfying way to take those questions forward. As I suggested above, it provides a kind of bridge between Sartre and those he criticises, especially Husserl.

I would like to emphasize here two particular questions of which self theory can give a satisfying account, taken this way.

1. Plato's cave: the problem of contact

In Plato's *Republic* (Plato, 1991: 403ff), the author puts forward the image of people living in a cave, only seeing the outside world by flickering reflections on the cave wall. He, and later Kant, called the real world *noumena*

and the world as perceived *phenomena*, and one of the major questions of phenomenology is the relationship between the two. Applying this distinction to our relation to other people can lead to a very uncomfortable conclusion, i.e. that there is no meaning to *contact* between people as they are, only our perceptions and projections of them. Thus we are in a hall of mirrors, assuming we are making contact with another person, even loving another person, yet we are only contacting our own projections, as they do the same thing (some versions of Gestalt therapy, very prominent in the early years, took this line even though it was incompatible with the Gestalt theory of self. We are all in an isolated cave of our own, and the 'people' we engage with, fight with, love, parent, are merely shadows on our cave walls. This appears a very despairing hypothesis, but it is not immediately clear how to get beyond it. It is a problem that Cartesian dualism cannot solve, because it cannot explain how one mind can accurately make contact with another mind.

However, I would contend that, in the Gestalt analysis of self and consciousness that I present here, the problem is resolved, though in a way that is counter-cultural. The theory asserts that at no time is self able to be objectively separated from other, that each is the condition for the other. It is well put by the late Daniel Stern, not a Gestaltist by affiliation, but highly compatible with our approach:

> It's very clear that human beings are constructed to read other people's minds... Our nervous system is constructed to do that... The conclusion... is that our minds are not so independent. Indeed, they are very interdependent. Our minds are not separate or isolated, and we are not the only owners of our own mind... Minds get created by virtue of being in constant interaction and dialogue with other minds, so that the whole idea of a 'one person psychology' ought not to exist, or at least it must be incomplete. (Stern, 2003: 23)

Now it becomes much clearer, in a way that I believe is only possible in such an emergent-relational theory. I can know and make real contact with you because I am always part of who you are in the contact, and you are part of who I am, and the act of separation needed to allow contact in no way removes from that connection. Going back to Sartre's argument with Husserl, you can either say that there is no transcendent ego, or, maybe stretching things a little, that the experience at the id boundary, with all the everyday self-descriptions and understandings of the world temporarily bracketed, *is* the transcendent ego. I can be mistaken about what I know of you, but no more and no less than I can be mistaken about what I know of me. And

the causes of such mistakes are the same – distancing and deception. Stern emphasises that we can take what I would call an existential stand, in Sartre's language "negating the other" in order to stand for something of my own. I become the one who is not the other I am relating to, not just the human other in this case. But to do this, I also need to distance from my implicit, preverbal, connection with the other and 'gate' (in language used by Stern) the interdependence between us. The separating is then an activity, and what is more, a relational activity, not a given of separateness. But then it is true that I am perceiving the other in terms of my own plans and understandings, and we enter a Kantian universe. Or we could call it, along with Buber (2002) 'I-it' relating, or *Urdistanz* – primal distancing (Buber, 1951). As well as this distancing we also practice strategic deception, of others and of ourselves, hiding our motivation for our actions and interests. We would be more likely to be aware of the other 'getting me wrong', and assume that we are 'getting ourselves right', and indeed many theories of counselling assume that the person knows themselves best (and once again, that the counsellor can only guess what is happening for the client). However, it may be more accurate that in central areas of neurotic or defensive functioning, most others would know us better than we know ourselves, because we are hiding significant aspects of our awareness and potential from ourselves.

This way of looking at contacting as a field activity out of which self emerges, rather than a self activity by which we find the field, is very consistent with the broad trend of how the universe is showing itself to modern science. The split between *noumena* and *phenomena*, or between ontology and epistemology, has broken down. The universe shows properties in very different ways depending on how the observation is made. In the everyday way of understanding this, it looks magical – 'How does the universe know what observation I am making?' But if I am part of the same unitary field as the situation that I am observing, it becomes complex but not magic. My making of the observation and what I observe co-emerge, can only do so in specific ways. So it is with self, i.e. if I am in a hall of mirrors, but I am also a mirror, whatever happens emerges from the interplay of reflections of reflections of reflections, yet if I move any one mirror, the emergence changes.

2. The individual

To some extent, there is a fashion and a cultural variation to the place given to the individual in psychotherapy theories. We have had conservative theories of adjustment to society, reaching their zenith in the former Soviet Union, where to be divergent was to be psychologically disturbed. In such theories, there is little place for the individual. However, other theories, including social constructivist theories and some in the Gestalt spectrum (see

Wheeler, 2000, Wollants 2008), also downplay the place of choice and will in human activity, and I would see them as implicitly conservative, though less coercive, than the Soviet model.

Yet on the other hand, there are the individualistic theories, again including versions of Gestalt therapy, where each person is seen as separate with our own wants, needs, blocks, neuroses etc., and we can only guess at the other person and it is not legitimate to talk about collectivities. These theories have usually been associated with Fritz Perls, and this is reasonable as a description of how he led his life. Yet it is not at all consistent with the theory he espoused. Even the two ideas that are most associated with an 'individualistic' approach to therapy, the 'Gestalt Prayer' and 'self support' (Perls, 1969), if properly understood, are not what they seem to be.

What Perls was consistently writing about was self and other emergent (or 'actualizing' in Goldstein's formulation) from a common field, and yet the self that emerges has emergent complex properties of choice and will. So when Perls wrote about 'self support', that could not consistently be seen as denying the need for connection with the environment because the environment is inherently involved in self. In fact, the opposite of 'self support' for Perls was not environmental support, but 'manipulating the environment for support', i.e. acting in a fixed way, for example by acting weak and helpless, which pulls a certain response from the environment. In the same way, if one reads the 'Gestalt Prayer' as a process of differentiating and offering contact rather than a statement of how things are, starting with 'I am I and you are you', a differentiation of needs and actions and expectations, then there is a possibility of contact, but not necessarily. To say 'If we meet that will be wonderful; if not it cannot be helped', that is really no different from Buber saying that 'I-thou comes through grace', or the 'primal distancing/Urdistanz' that must precede contact.

A table is created through the interaction of a carpenter and a tree, and maintained by the environment that supports its integrity - temperature, moisture etc. Yet it can still support a plate of food. A baby is created through the interaction of a man and a woman, and is maintained by sunlight, air, nourishment etc. However it still has its own wants, interests and needs. In the same way, self is emergent from and maintained by the field, and yet is an active participant in the world. It actually strikes me as strange and contradictory when those who argue against human capacities of choice and will, frame their objections in the form 'Most people say… but I say...'

Conclusion

I have attempted here to give a brief description of my understanding of the meaning and significance of the self in Gestalt therapy. Self is emergent, yet powerful and creative, a power that is given by self's participation in the field at least as much as by its existential negation of the otherness. It is capable of both making change and being changed. If we either make self merely an outcropping of social factors or an isolated traveller in an alien universe, we lose that vital dialectic. Human beings have at every moment a dual direction to be an individual, and to be a part of the field. Sometimes the contradiction between these is impossible to bridge, and we have difficulties, and come to therapy. The difficulty is thus a statement of both the person and the field.

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18.

Philip BROWNELL

Touch of Another Kind:
Contact With God and Spiritual Self

"The sense of being separate and on our own is precarious.
We are haunted by the possibility that our sense
that we are conducting our lives is illusory.
The possibility that our autonomy is abusive and pernicious
makes us doubt its justification and validity."
–Alphonso Lingis, *First Person Singular*, 2007, p.6

The self is the subject of experience. If experience were a house, then self would be the owner of that house. It is the "I" and the "mine." The self is the first-person singular perspective.

I stand. I sit. I am aware that air moves over my skin, blown by the fan next to my desk, but it is late in the day and my house feels stuffy in the Bermudian afternoon heat. My black cat is curled up on my bed where I just ran the air conditioning, and my sheets are cool to the touch. I take a break from writing and lie down next to him. He looks apprehensive, and I put my arms all around him and cuddle my face into his side talking to him, calling him by the name I gave him. He tucks his chin into his chest and closes his eyes. I scratch his head and stroke the fur over his body. It feels soft, but instantly I know that it's not as soft as one of my other cats. Still, I coo to him and tell him he's my boo boo. This is my cat, and I yearn for him to look up and start purring.

I am alive.

Genitive Function

Some people claim there is no self and that what people call self is just the moment-to-moment awareness of an embodied human being who has memory. That is one way of imagining first person experience.

There are many maps and models of the self just as there are numerous experiences in life. It is the raw, primordial sense of being situated. It is the story we tell ourselves about who we are as a result of such experiences, and it is the choosing and sorting mechanism that helps us make our way in any given situation (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951; Zahavi, 2003).

The gestalt therapy understanding of the self follows the contacting of the organism-environment entity and has been explicated as a three-fold function. The literature is consistent in identifying function as opposed to structure, i.e. functions of the self. So, what is a function in this context? Like a tone in a musical scale that begs to be resolved, I have always wondered, "Function of what?" "What do they mean by 'function'?"

There are at least three ways of understanding the word "function" [1]:

1. In general, function refers to an *action performed* that produces a result. It is related as a constant to purpose, intention, or objective, which can change.

2. In mathematics function is a mathematical relationship in which one *quantity depends on or is determined by another quantity.* Alter the first and it will result in alterations in the second.

3. In business, function refers to a *process conducted* as part of the mission of an organization. As such it is task- and goal-oriented and highly pragmatic.

In each of the possible definitions of function given above, the term is tied to the action of a verb or a verbal adjective (an action *performed*, a quantity *depending*, a process *conducted*). Gestalt therapy is not a mathematical relationship or a business transaction, but there is a sense in which all three of these perspectives are relevant. In gestalt self-formation there is action taking place, the self is dependent on contacting, and the function in question is a process; it is a function-ing.

Furthermore, to say that something is a function of self is to suggest the action of functioning can be conceived as a grammatical genitive (of the self, with "self" being the subject or the object of the words "function of"). So, would "function of self" be a subjective or objective genitive? That is, would "self" be the subject or the object in regards to the particular action (function-ing)? Does the function arise from the self or come to rest upon, or constitute, the self? In the construct "id

1. Taken from http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/function.html#ixzz3ces8MHah and downloaded June 10, 2015.

function of self," for instance, does the self manifest what is described as id or does the id action give form to the self?

This is a matter of the etiology of self. To say that the self manifests itself, creates id is to presuppose the pre-existence of self. To say that the id functioning at least partially accounts for the self, is to presuppose something other than self that is at least partially responsible for self because it is first responsible for the id, ego, or personality function-ing. If one were to make the id, for instance, constituting the self, not only would we have structures or some kind of form, but we would have a regress, with the process of id action preceding the self and the concomitant question of where that id action comes from or to what that action belongs. The same would hold true for ego function and personality function of self.

Lobb (2015) asserted that there are various functions of the self but that gestalt therapy has traditionally described three of them, i.e. id function, ego function, and personality function (cf. Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951). The gestalt construct of id function corresponds to what many call the experiential self, and the gestalt construct of personality function corresponds to what is called the narrative or autobiographical self. Many believe a better construct for the narrative self is "person" (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008). Phenomenal consciousness on the other hand, the awareness of moment-to-moment experience, "entails a primitive form of self-referentiality or for-me-ness" (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008, p. 204) that is best understood with the grammatical concept of voice.

The Voice of Intentionality

When we have an experience of something – when we think of an idea, when we perceive a percept, when we feel an emotion – we are intending. It is an aggressive process. What is the relationship, however, of the subject, the one intending, to the action of intending? That is communicated by grammatical voice.

Voice is a feature in verbal systems; it "...is that property of the verbal idea which indicates how the subject is related to the action" (Dana and Mantey 1927/1955, p. 155). The subject may take an active, passive, or middle voice with regards to whatever he or she is engaged in. That is, the subject may act upon the object or manifest the state intrinsic to the object, and that would be expressed through the active voice. The subject may be acted upon, and that would be expressed through the passive voice, and the subject may participate in some way in the results of the action, relating the action more intimately to the subject (Dana and Mantey 1927/1955)[2]. That would be expressed through the middle voice.

2. This section on voice comes from a previous treatment of the subject in a chapter titled "Intentional Spirituality," cited in the reference section.

It is this aspect of self-interest[3] that makes the middle voice the best analogy for understanding the relationship between a subject and the action of intending.

As explained in Dana and Mantey (1927/1955) the middle voice is that use of a verbal idea describing the subject as participating in one way or another in the results of the action. Mounce (2003) calls this the *self-interest* nuance of the middle voice. The active voice emphasizes the action, but the middle voice emphasizes the agent, thus it is more immediately relevant to self-experience. Hindu grammarians described the active voice as *parasmai padan* (word for another), while they describe the middle voice as *atmane padan* (word for one's self). The context in any given situation indicates how the subject participates, but here are three common examples (Dana and Mantey, *ibid*):

1. The direct middle – the results of the action are referred directly to the agent with a reflexive force ("I hit the ball to myself").
2. The indirect middle – sometimes the stress is upon the agent as producer of the action rather than participant in its results; the action is related to the agent in some special way ("I, myself, hit the ball").
3. The permissive middle – the agent voluntarily yielding the self to the results of the action, or seeking to secure those results for his or her own self-interest ("I hit the ball for myself").

Thus, I intend – think, feel, experience in some way some "thing", some aspect, some feature of my phenomenal landscape – in the middle voice. It is this self-reference, this self-interest that connects the subject to its intentional object, and it is an immediate action. That is, the first-personal givenness of experiential phenomena is accounted for by a pre-reflective self-consciousness, which is present whenever a person is living through an experience, that is, whenever one is consciously perceiving the world, thinking a thought, feeling an emotion or sensing a sensation (Zahavi 2006). One is having an experience, not noticing oneself having an experience. However, if one begins to attend, on a meta level, and thinks about oneself having an experience, then the pre-reflective self-consciousness, the middle voice of intentionality, shifts to another intentional object, but the flow of intentionality keeps moving in that same middle voice.

Related to the middle voice of intentionality, the self emerges through contacting, through the reaching out according to interest, curiosity, and need in order to make a way in the world (Philippson, 2009; Lobb & Wheeler, 2013). Accordingly, people speak of a panoply of selves, one for each context in which such contacting takes place. So there is a person's office self, family self,

3. All attitudes are idio-optic; that is, they see the world through their own interests.

playful self, club self, golf self, etc. More critically there is the "ecological self, the interpersonal self, the extended self, the private self and the conceptual self" (Zahavi, 2003, p. 57). When we create maps of the self, which are really models for understanding the self and by what functions it forms, we understand that these maps are not the territories they represent. So, the words comprising these maps are historical in nature. They are what we do in trying to make better sense of what goes on, but they are after-the-fact. We look back over our shoulder at the territories we have travelled across and we connect the dots, trying to come up with theories that answer the most questions, and account for the most observations. (This is the process of abduction.)

In that process we imply that the self takes "form" It forms through the processes of id action, ego action, and personality action. The human being constitutes the self through contacting, and self actively seeks out intentional experience through idio-optic attitudes. We further say that the self forms in relationship, and that without relationship there can be no self.

> ... it is the process of taking form which defines the being: before any individuation, the being is a rich field of possibilities which can only be by becoming, that is, by individuation... the human being as the sum of all those actions through which it becomes an individual: "the being is what it becomes through relating"
>
> So an individual consists of relationships. And this verb 'consists' needs to be understood at two levels:
>
> –the individual is nothing other than the relationship (s) and constantly renewed acts of individuation which create him or her as the common link between various orders of experience
>
> –it is, moreover, relationships which give a being its consistency, its reality. (Robine, 2011, pp. 88-89)

If the self forms as a function of some kind of action in relationship, who or what is performing that action? Who or what precedes the self in the objective genitive "id function of self?" What individuates through relationship? As implied above, it must be the whole organism, the embodied and situated human being.

Finitude and Embodiment

At 4:30 A.M. on the second Saturday in May a person named Sam emerges from a dream. He is reclining. He feels himself horizontal on the bed, and that is different from the upright, running, frantic Sam who felt as if he were held

back or restrained in his dream. As his awareness shifts, the dream fades, and Sam becomes more cognizant of the room in which he finds himself. It is his bedroom. He knows that room from the experience of having moved into it, furnished it, cleaned it many times, and of walking around in it during the dark night. The more his awareness wakes up, the more Sam feels at home in his world. These are the first moments of his new day.

Actually, Sam is in a room that is on a street, that is in a neighborhood, that is in a district, that is in a state, that is in a country, that is on a continent, that is in a hemisphere, that is on a planet, that is in a solar system, that is in a galaxy, that is in the universe. The universe is so vast as to approximate a practical infinity. Of course, it is not infinite, but the unified field[4] is something of which Sam is a small part, and the unified field affects every aspect of Sam's life. The universe attains a practical infinity because Sam cannot grasp it all at once. In fact, he is ignorant of most of it. There are aspects of the universe that escape him not just because he isn't thinking of them at any given moment; they escape him because he doesn't have a category in which to put them and he cannot perceive them from his bed. He does not even suspect they exist.

What Sam knows of the unified field is limited by his body and his finitude. His body is part of his finitude. What it is like to be Sam depends on what Sam's body is like and where it is located. Sam is average in height, so, he simultaneously lacks the short and the tall perspective, and it feels to him like he is one of the crowd, not below it or above it. He might say that he is an average person, a self among selves.

Various factors related to a lived body contribute to Sam's sense of self, to the awareness he has of being in the world. Specifically, Sam's interoceptive, exteroceptive, proprioceptive and kinesthetic systems provide him a sense of his body and of being oriented empirically. Proprioception is the felt sense of the location and relative position of his various body parts with respect to objects and other people, and the term kinesthetic has to do with the body movement that is always in play for all of these systems he has. Exteroception is data from outside of his body and interoception concerns what is happening inside his body. Thus, when he walks and his feet strike the ground, he becomes exteroceptively aware of hardness or softness – the characteristics of the surface – and he becomes aware interoceptively of whether the surface feels comfortable to him or not (Fogel, 2009).

Craig (2003) provides a neuropsychological understanding of the processes associated with Sam's internal systems:

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4. The unified field is more than the physical universe, but the full discussion of field theory exceeds the scope of this chapter.

> Converging evidence indicates that primates have a distinct cortical image of homeostatic afferent activity that reflects all aspects of the physiological condition of all tissues of the body. This interoceptive system, associated with autonomic motor control, is distinct from the exteroceptive system (cutaneous mechanoreception and proprioception) that guides somatic motor activity. The primary interoceptive representation in the dorsal posterior insula engenders distinct highly resolved feelings from the body that include pain, temperature, itch, sensual touch, muscular and visceral sensations, vasomotor activity, hunger, thirst, and 'air hunger'. In humans, a meta-representation of the primary interoceptive activity is engendered in the right anterior insula, which seems to provide the basis for the subjective image of the material self as a feeling (sentient) entity, that is, emotional awareness. (p. 500)

Cameron (2002) claimed that a person's interoceptive system accounts for the sense of embodied self, and "...relates to how we perceive feelings from our bodies that determine our mood, sense of well-being and emotions" (p. 1505). As such, it can do so with or without awareness.

Sam can feel what it is like to be alive at a certain place in the actual, physical environment. He comprehends that at a primordial level, and "maps the coordinates" of his body in such space (Damasio, 1999, p. 153). This embodied sense of self emerges suddenly, without warning. It simply occurs when representations emerge across the entire neural network. In the experience of the person, it is an impression. An impression is an idea or feeling about something or someone, especially one formed without conscious thought. It is not a deduction or a conclusion from logic. If you wake up on a cold day in the middle of winter, and then you step into a warm shower, the water hitting your skin comes with a sensation – the sense of something wet and warm smacking the skin. But then something else emerges, and it is an involuntary resonance: "Ahhh! (That feels good!)" Likewise, wake up after a solid night's sleep, and there emerges the need to stretch. That need is the first impression, followed by the action tendency to actually stretch, followed by another impression – how good the stretch itself feels. This is an interoceptive contacting of one's own body and in a sense of one's own self. It is not deduced from a series of observations. In terms of subjective experience it comes all at once, but there is a sure sense that it comes from within as a feature of being alive.

At the same time Sam's sense of self is not of being omnipresent in the universe, but of being placed, anchored by a body, and limited to a particular time and place.

> ...we experience the world as a body. When we reach for the

> toothbrush it is near or far, high or low. Those evaluations come as a function of the body through which we see it, reach out for it, and pick it up, and those evaluations are made depending on our actual location with reference to any such thing as a toothbrush. Our consciousness of such things is the self-regulating aspect of the body interacting with its environment (Cosmelli & Thompson, 2011). Perception, enactment, emotion, dreaming, remembering are all ways in which a person self-regulates, and they depend on the living body rather than just a brain encased in a skull. Referring to Antonio Damasio's 1999 work in neurology, Cosmelli and Thompson claimed that the nervous system, continually maps the state of the body "through a series of core neural structures that are crucial for both body regulation, and the feeling of self. In this theory, creature consciousness with a minimal phenomenal feeling of self, arises as a feature of life-regulation processes effected by the nervous system in tight coupling with the body" (p. 170). (Brownell, 2015, p. 118-119).

Although Sam's sense of self is tightly coupled with his body, his sense of self does not stop at the physical limit of his skin. He cannot inhabit all space and all time, but his sense of self extends into the world. This extended self manifests itself in two ways. He can project or imagine himself forward or backwards in time, and he can extend his cognitions beyond the confines of his cranium through interface, through contacting, and the utility of whatever is present at hand. An example is in the case of Richard Feynman, Nobel prize-winning physicist. He worked out his theorems on paper, and someone remarked how wonderful it was that he had a record of his work in those scratches and notes. Feynman corrected him. He said that he had to do the work on paper, and the man said the work had been done in Feynman's head, but the record of it was on the paper. To that, Feynman insisted that it was not a record; it was the working. The "loop into the external medium was integral to his intellectual activity (the 'working') itself" (Clark, 2011, n.p.).

I can relate to Feynman. I am a writer, and what's more, I am a keyboard writer. When I put my fingers to the keyboard, my thoughts flow. They do not do that in the same way if I use a pencil on paper, and they do not do so if I am attempting to text with my thumbs on a mobile phone. I am useless dictating, and I'm not very good communicating my thoughts on a phone call. I am best writing out my thoughts using a keyboard, because the keyboard has become an extension of myself. Thus, "self" cannot be confined to my brain, encased in bone inside the skull or to my body with nerve fibers running down my spine and out into the periphery of my body, stopping at my fingers. My self extends into the environment and includes those tools

ready at hand – those tools that I pick up and find useful. It extends into other people, whose selves are also extended. Just as the brain creates dendrites that weave a neural net of physical connections among a field of neurons, the self creates unseen relational 'fibers' extending into the physical and interpersonal environment, creating networks of useful and meaningful connections with the world of people and things. Many of these become significant extensions of the individuated self.

This sense of being connected up to the world through contact, through smell, sight, hearing, and touch for instance, is augmented by the inner impressions of being a body that is alive and situated in that world. In touch, though, we have touching some external object, and we have touch touching touch. It's a different kind of experience. There is a reflexive sense of being touched. When I attend to my fingers on the keyboard, for instance, I can feel the keys and I can also feel the keys touching me back. I touch with my fingers and I am touched through my fingers. The secondary experience is the interoceptive impression.

Another Kind of Touch

In Greek there are two ways of understanding the construct of "another." There is another of the same kind, and there is another of a different kind. With this in mind, what I propose is that there is a phenomenality to contact with divinity. Furthermore, contact with God affects self-formation. Still, if we cannot see God with our eyes and hear Him with our ears, then how might we experience the divine touch? To put that into more phenomenological terms, how is God given? How does God appear, and how is God present?

How might a person experience contact with God? It is a kind of touching; it is an impression with similarities to the interoceptive/proprioceptive sensing described above. Yet, it is touch of another kind. I suggest an interoception of the spirit[5], but I understand this as another of a different kind.

Consider this experience out of the life of the prophet Elijah for example. It is written with a phenomenal perspective, that is, what it was like for Elijah:

> The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by" Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake, came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the

5. For the sake of this discussion, "spirit" can be seen as a metaphor describing a capacity of the self.

> fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kings 19:11-13 New International Version (NIV)

For Elijah God was not in the wind, not in the earthquake, and not in the fire. Elijah experienced those events as natural, momentous, but mundane. That is, these were unremarkable for him phenomenally outside of being what they were. However, then came what is variously translated as a "still small voice", "a whisper" or "a potent silence". The prophet was expectant. He had been told to stand where the Lord was about to pass, so, he was listening.

> What are the various possibilities of this listening silence? The first, and one of the strongest, is that in which the act whereby our speech is suspended opens us to the dimension of silence in the world. It is then by my silence that I listen to silence, not in a form of introspection whereby I listen to myself being silent but in going out to meet the silent plenitude… (Chrétien, 2004a, p. 50)

The call of God for Elijah was an impression. There had been sensory experience, but God was not 'in' it. That is, Elijah was not using his exteroceptive system to perceive l'Appel de Dieu[6]. The significance of the hearing is not in sensing an external stimulus but in the touch of silence that was a recognition of a different type – another kind of touching. One famous preacher[7] of a previous generation said of this story:

> …out of the midst of the still air there came what the Hebrew calls, 'a voice of gentle silence,' as if silence had become audible! There is nothing more amazing than an awful stillness after a dread uproar. Even the noise of the wind and of the storm which could not cow Elijah was not so terrible as the still small voice by which Jehovah called His servant near. Then the Prophet covered his face and went to the mouth of the cave and stood to listen, for the still small voice had won the solemn attention of his soul. It had done for him what all the rest could not do – for this reason that the Lord was not in the wind, nor in the earthquake, no in the fire – but the Lord *was* in the still small voice, and Elijah knew it and was awed and prepared himself to hear what God, the Lord, would speak. (Spurgeon, 1882, p. 2)

6. The call of God (Chrétien, 2004 b).
7. Charles Haddon Spurgeon delivered a sermon on 9 July 1882, at the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London.

A First-Person, Phenomenal Example

I am the oldest of five children, and I grew up in a dysfunctional family. We went to church on holidays, and I hated it. I did not do well in Sunday school as a child, because nothing made sense, and I felt compelled to engage in something that had no interest or relevance for me. However, I loved movies like "The Song of Bernadette" starring Jennifer Jones, and "The Robe" starring Richard Burton, and would watch them intently when they came on television. "The Song of Bernadette" is about a young girl who saw a vision of the Virgin Mary that involved miracles of healing at the grotto at Lourdes, and "The Robe" is about the Roman soldier who was present at the crucifixion, and who cast lots to win Christ's garment after Jesus died. There was something magnificent in those stories of deep character change and devotion through suffering and self-sacrifice.

When things got terribly bad in our home, I would walk to the bottom of the pasture behind our house, sit under the largest fruit tree by myself, and watch the clouds drift overhead as they crossed the Sacramento Valley of central California. I talked to God. My talking was all lament, and it felt one-sided. It was talking to myself and rehearsing my wounds, my frustrations, the misery of living in my family, but it was also a calling out to God. Couldn't He fix it? Wouldn't He just take me out of this world? I wanted to die and to be done with it.

When I turned eighteen, I joined the Navy in order to get out of the house. I went to boot camp, where they made everyone attend chapel on Sunday. It took place in a large, circular amphitheater with bleacher seating. Since we could sit anywhere we wanted, I joined several of my friends as far away up high from the services as possible. And when the hymns were sung, I sat there laughing at them so hard that tears rolled down my cheeks. I thought they were ridiculous.

I became a neuropsychiatric technician for the Navy stationed at the Naval Hospital in Oakland, across the bay from San Francisco. I got an apartment off base with a friend who had partially grown up in Japan. At one point he had wanted to study for the priesthood, but he was more interested in Buddhism. We read Eric Fromm, Eric Berne, Eric Hoffer, Alan Watts, Ken Kesey, Robert A. Heinlein, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, *The Upanishads*, and the *Bhagavad Gita*. Frankly, I was more interested in going to rock concerts, pop festivals, and smoking marijuana than I was in these psychological, sociological, and spiritual considerations, but I did enjoy thinking with him.

All was not, however, pleasant during that period of time. It was the Vietnam War, and I took care of Marine warriors fresh from the combat zone. It was an era of upheaval, when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, there was a riot on the locked ward, and I had my skull fractured in the fighting. I suffered

vicarious traumatization from working with the combat vets and PTSD from being assaulted at work. My friends went over to Vietnam and were killed.

Someone in my parents' church who had been praying for me, gave me a Phillips translation of the New Testament[8]. I put it aside, but one night I looked at it, and I said to the room, as if God might hear, "If you are real, make yourself known to me. On my part, I'll read this thing", and I pointed to the New Testament. As I began to read, the text came alive. It became an irresistibly interesting story, and I found myself wanting to continue reading. Over several days and weeks, as I continued reading, the story made sense for the first time in my life. I experienced one aha moment after another. I began to consider the possibility that this story might be true.

Since then I have had several moments of high contact with God. On one occasion, God convinced me that I needed to stop smoking cigarettes. On one occasion, God confirmed His intention for me to prepare for full-time Christian ministry. On another occasion, God comforted me after I had lost my job, and found myself homeless. On several occasions, God has confirmed to me a providential meeting between myself and someone else. On another occasion, God confirmed the selection of a woman to be my wife. As these and similar incidents have taken place, I have experienced a physical miracle, a visual appearance, an inner impression, and a simple and settled knowing. I have been speaking in this chapter largely of the impression that leads to knowing, and I've been comparing it to the interoceptive sensing that we have, the inner sense of our bodies. But in all these things, it is contacting that is taking place.

> In the still small voice of God we are given a message that bears the stamp of his personality quite clearly and in a way we will learn to recognize. But in contrast with other cases, the *medium* through which the message comes is diminished almost to the vanishing point, taking the form of thoughts that are our thoughts, though these thoughts are not *from* us. (Willard, 1999, p. 87)

Along the way I have learned to listen. When I talk with God, I often do experience a reply that sometimes He initiates. As I've said, it is an interoceptive-like experience. Thoughts appear that come to me as impressions. I know what it is to dialogue with my friend Dan Bloom over philosophical issues. I know what it is to plan, and organize research with my colleagues Pablo Herrera Salinas and Jan Roubal in the international research project. I know what it is to engage in discussion with colleagues in various online discussion groups, where ideas stimulate more ideas, and we gorge ourselves on mind candy. But God is not in

8. It is a version in contemporary English.

those things. I would call what happens in those situations, realizations but not impressions, not as I have been using the word 'impressions' in this chapter. A realization is relatively slow to arrive and emerges from the give-and-take, just like the ferry that decreases speed as it nears the pier and comes to a stop to be tied up before the passengers can disembark. An impression is a transport across the sound in a snap, in an instant one is on the other side. They are faint. If they were a cloud, they would be a mist. If they were a bell, the sound would be as if from a distant tower. If I pay them no mind, they fade quickly, like evaporation. But if I notice and attend to them, then the ringing of the bell is unforgettable.

The dialogue with God is personal. I do not mean that it is private. I mean that it is personal. It goes to the heart of who I am. It is about what is important, how I experience myself in the world, what I am to others, what others are to me, how God's working in the world relates to me. God and I do not exchange abstracts or intellectualize about theorems of physics. We do not discuss Levinas. To be honest, I often talk with God about how long I have to be here in this world before I can go home. It is a familiar theme, because that is what I used to ask Him while I sat under the fruit tree so long ago. The difference is that back then, I got no answer that I can recall, but now I do. At this point, I've learned also to recognize His concerns, so, the experience is not simply a matter of process but also of content. When He says something to me, I know by the way it comes, and what it is about that it is from God. This contact stands within the scope of relationship.

Sometimes this contact brings a parting of the curtain so that I am transported into a perspective that feels like it must be eternal. Those moments are not possible to capture in words. They do not arrive with words. They are splendid, and I am moved, often to tears, undone by them. I can relate to Elijah covering his face when he hears the still small voice or Isaiah confessing to God that he is a sinner who lives among sinners when he is given the vision of the glory of God in heaven. I am not a prophet; that is not what I am claiming. I am attempting to convey something of the experience of place compared to God that is often one aspect of contact with God. During such contact, I am aware that I am creature to His creator. Although I do not experience dread or horror, I think this must be what the *mysterium tremendum* is as if one regards oneself to be adopted as a family member into the household of God. Contact with God gives me a sense of belonging to God. In terms of attachment, I have found an infinite and secure attachment object, and that is settling.

I also have the sense that God cares about our relationship. As I have written elsewhere (Brownell, 2012)

> the realization that God speaks, that God says, "I am" is called revelation, but what I have been attempting to describe in terms of

> phenomenon is the experience that one has, in contact, personally heard from God. "One knows by experience that *God is – God is for, to and with me.* The greatest implication of the possibility that God is present – involved in the situation – is the give-and-take that is then possible between oneself and God, inducing the actions that reveal one's self in turn (Wojtyla, 1979)" (Brownell, 2012, p. 95).

This is something Martin Buber also understood:

> Philosophy errs in thinking of religion as founded in a noetic act, even if an inadequate one, and in therefore regarding the essence of religion as the knowledge of an object which is indifferent to being known. As a result, philosophy understands faith as an affirmation of truth lying somewhere between clear knowledge and confused opinion. Religion, on the other hand, insofar as it speaks of knowledge at all, does not understand it as a noetic relation of a thinking subject to a neutral object of thought, but rather as a mutual contact, as the genuinely reciprocal meeting in the fullness of life between one active existence and another. Similarly, it understands faith as the entrance into this reciprocity, as binding oneself in a relationship with an indemonstrable and unprovable, yet even so, in relationship, knowable Being... (Buber, 1952, pp. 32-33)

That Buber would point to faith as the entrance into relationship with God is not altogether off the mark for a gestalt therapist, because Goodman (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951) pointed out that faith is an indispensable principal of contact, saying "...faith is knowing, beyond awareness, that if one takes a step there will be ground underfoot; one gives oneself unhesitatingly to the act, one has faith that the background will produce the means." (p. 343)

> Thus, faith becomes the instrument of knowing and an essential principle of contact. In a gestalt therapy training group, for instance, when a student takes that first step of working as a therapist, the student entrusts him- or herself to the other people present and to the process of training, and that faith becomes supportive. (Brownell, 2008, p. 229)

This relationship among perceiving, believing, and belonging is attested by Husserl and other phenomenologists:

> "It belongs to what is taken for granted, prior to all scientific thought and all philosophical questioning, that the world is – always is in advance – and that every correction of an opinion, whether an experiential or

other opinion, presupposes the already existing world…" (Husserl, 1970, p. 110)

> We can only encounter things in the various ways we do in so far as we already belong to a world. To put it simply, without a sense of being part of a world, things could not be perceived or thought of as residing in the same world as ourselves. Hence the sense of reality is not a matter of voyeuristic access to some external realm, from which the voyeur remains separate. Instead, it is phenomenologically inseparable from the sense of belonging. (Ratcliffe, p. 7)

Merleau-Ponty (1968) refers to this as "…the certitude I have of being connected up with the world by my look" (p. 28) Just so, there is a conviction that one has encountered God, attested by an interoceptive-like experience. One is connected up with God by God's call. One knows the call of God in one's response. This all takes place in a world to which the person belongs and a world in which God is transcendent ontically yet immanent phenomenally.

Impact on Self-Formation

To put this into a gestalt therapy frame, the question is how contact with divinity affects the threefold functions of self, i.e. id, ego, and personality.

This is especially relevant for spiritual competence in psychotherapy (Brownell, 2015). Spiritual competence is a sub-set of cultural competence as far as the wider field is concerned, in which also competence is understood according to a cube model of knowledge, ability, and outcomes. To what extent is any given gestalt therapist

1. knowledgeable of the tenets, features, customs, and worldviews of his or her spiritual client
2. able to work within the horizon and attitude of that client's spiritual experience and convictions, which is not just keeping one's horizon intact while seeing how the client constructs reality, because it is a matter of allowing the possibility of the client's horizon to alter the horizon of the therapist – Gadamer's fusion of horizons
3. helpful in facilitating spiritually, relevant growth or change?

Contact with God has been a topic of investigation in the wider fields of psychology and psychotherapy outside of gestalt therapy. There, it is known, among other things, as "spiritually transcendent experiences" Addressing the subject, O'Grady and Bartz (2012) stated that a spiritually transcendent experience is …

> ...a subjective experience of the sacred that affects one's self-perception, feelings, goals, and ability to transcend difficulties... *spiritually transcendent experience* can be operationalized as a spiritual modification of consciousness that extends beyond the ordinary vicissitudes of everyday life. Spiritually transcendent experiences are unique within the study of psychological processes, as such experiences seem to defy or move beyond the typical ways in which we conceptualize psychological change or development. (p. 161; cf. Koss-Chioino & Hefner, 2006; Goldstein, 2007)

Spiritually transcendent experiences are those in which contact with the sacred is at the core. The sacred for most people can be understood to include God, divine beings, or a transcendent reality (Pargament, 2007). Contact with the sacred...

> ...evokes a wave of emotions. These emotions, Rudolf Otto (1928) argued, are what make religious experiences most distinctive. In fact, he believed that existing language could not adequately describe the feelings that surround the holy. The new term he coined, *mysterium*, is a complex of emotions. Like a magnet, it has a negative pole, the *mysterium tremendum,* made of feelings of repulsion, fear, and dread, the kinds of feelings we experience when we watch a horror movie. But like a magnet, the *mysterium* has a positive pole, the *mysterium fascinans*, consisting of strong feelings of attraction, including emotions of gratitude, humility, and reverence... (Pargament, 2007, pp. 70-71).

A spiritually transcendent experience is also often thought of as mystical in nature. It is the subjective sense of a meeting with that which is holy, that which is sacred, that which is beyond the material confines of nature and thus that which transcends our usual ways of knowing. Mystical experience is marked by a sense of unity with the numinous; thus, it is a meeting, a contacting. "'Numinous consciousness' refers to the individual's feeling that he or she is in the presence of a sacred objet. The object is perceived to be absolutely real –'a foundational reality...'" (Pargament, 2007, p. 71)

What is the effect of contact with divinity? How does such contact affect the self? In the story of Christ's appearance to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, following the crucifixion and the resurrection, Jesus explained the scriptures concerning the Messiah to these men, and they later remembered the effect of meeting Him – "Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32) Regardless of one's belief about the historicity of this event,

within its own context, this is a report on the subjective experience of what these people regarded to be contact with divinity. What does it say? There is a burning, a passionate resonance, an interoceptive knowing related to Otto's *mysterium fascinans*.

Since experience of the sacred can be so powerful, people often build their lives around such experiences. Thus, contact with God becomes an organizing force, a factor for consideration in making decisions, weighing alternatives, forming values, embarking on courses of action, and so forth. One could say that such contact becomes the basis for a dominant attitude and the foundation for a faith-filled horizon – thus, a major influence in such a person's life, world.

In my own world, the *mysterium fascinans* and the mystical experience of the numinous have been the dominant sense of being in contact with God. He has been a sage, a guide, a teacher, and a companion with whom I have had a sense of utter acceptance and belonging. I cannot separate what the Bible says about God from my experience of God, because the introductory 'deal' I made with God, the one that He took up with me ("If you are real, make yourself known to me") involved reading the New Testament. I have encountered God most significantly in the Bible, and what the Bible says about God has infiltrated my worldview. Understand what I am saying! I do not mean that I have merely read about God and formed a theology from such reading. I mean that while reading, God has made Himself present with me, entered into a dialogue around some portion of scripture, related it to life, my life, world events, other people, and so forth.

The *mysterium fascinans* accords with the description of the working of the Holy Spirit that is written in the New Testament[9]. God as a presence is the in-the-moment sense of such contact, but over time I can look back at our relationship and realize that God has been patient, committed, and that He has brought me into and out of tremendous growth experiences, virtually all of which have been difficult if not excruciating. I have a sense of Him as being from beyond but also present at hand – transcendent yet immanent. In terms of gestalt therapy, the in-the-moment contact is id function and the history of our relationship is personality function. In addition, in the course of life, the decisions to respond with investigative inquiry and to follow, to heed the still small voice and to act in accordance with the impressions given to me, are ego function. It is in faith that one responds to the call of God, and so it is an existential responding that is every bit the same as what Goodman said about stepping out believing that the field would supply what is needed. Indeed, the impact of this call upon the self is to stimulate response, but the ego function

9. He is described as a comforter and encourager who would be with always and lead into "all truth." Thus, the experience is of reading and obtaining repeated aha moments of realization the feed the content of one's faith.

is based upon one's id function and personality function. Thus, it is not a leap into darkness, a hope against hope, or a blind rolling of the dice. The impact of contact with God is a response of enactment that in turn reveals me to myself in increasing layers of action. Indeed, through contact with God I become a spiritual self.

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19.

Ruella FRANK

Self in Motion

In the early 1950s, the founders of Gestalt therapy posited a radical notion of self. Self, they stated, is a process emergent in the activity of creative adjusting - dynamic, fluid and changing. In the experience of moving through the world, self discovers and invents the world it is moving through. Similar to every revolutionary idea, this radical thinking offers us the rich ground for further expansion and development of its phenomenological stance. It gives us the foundation from which to say what is already there and the foundation to say what is yet to be said.

As a phenomenological methodology, Gestalt therapy is concerned with an understanding of how we live the situation we are living: how to analyze, describe, and know it. In this chapter, I hope to illuminate more fully the organizing processes of self by presenting a closer investigation or next step into the dynamics of human movement. I advance an analysis of the structure and function of movement progressions, and give a phenomenological account of creative adjusting by breaking down movement into its most basic elements and exploring the means by which we make manifest experience before it becomes objectified in reflection. I argue here for the understanding of movement as part of any phenomenological analysis regarding self. Furthermore, I emphasize the significance of fundamental movements emerging in the time frame of the first year of life and their constitutive participation in the moment-to-moment experiences throughout life - a developmental perspective.

In general, the essence of my work has been to recognize and validate the importance of interactive movement in the creating and organizing of experience. I observe and identify movement patterns in relationship dyads, specifically baby-parent and therapist-patient dyads. I explore movement from a structural-functional perspective and consider how each person in the relationship creatively adjusts within their particular situation. More precisely, I examine the specifics of how each moves and is being moved in relation to the other. This becomes an important means by which the processes of creative adjusting can be made known. As the authors of *Gestalt therapy* significantly noted, the process of creative adjusting is the essential function of self (Perls, Hefferline, Goodman 1972/1951: 247). Looking at these overt and often subtle movement transactions between baby and parent, therapist and patient, we learn something essential about the processes by which self arises.

Before I continue discussing the emergence of self as movement, I need to elucidate my understanding of the primary and fundamental position that movement holds in the play of human experience.

Kinesthesia and the feel of our self-movements

Although movement is the most basic common denominator to our existence, to many movement is often thought of as no more than a locational shift. Movement is, however, much more than this and needs a greater and more precise description to be more fully comprehended. Movement is the shaping of space by bodies in motion – one with the other – within a variety of contexts from which its qualitative character arises. Movement is dynamic, relational, and situational. As such, it makes sense to begin with movement as the starting point to look at the nature of contacting and the emerging sense-of-self.

Sensitizing ourselves to our own movement experiences is, to me, a primary requirement for the organizing of flexible and creative adjusting. Through kinesthesia, or movement in awareness, we are in direct experience with the situation we are living. The word kinesthesia is derived from the Greek kineo - "to put in motion" and aesthesis, "sensation" or "impression" Kinesthesia is the sense or feel of our self-movements.

We become kinesthetically aware as we experience one part of our moving body in relation to the others, we sense our body weight and muscular tensions, and we feel various pressures against our body. Through kinesthesia we listen or attend to our self-movements and feel our subtle creative adjusting within the situation. We learn *that* we are, *how* we are, and *where* we are. Kinesthetic experiences can either be concealed from us or brought to awareness. And when brought to the foreground, valuable information regarding our condition

and the state of our world becomes available. The situation unveils itself to us through a variety of felt qualities and combinations of qualities experienced through moving. Felt qualities are not emotions, but rather particular feeling-tones or affects; i.e. the continua of bound-free, gradual-abrupt, even-changing, high-low intensity, and many more. Flowing on the stream of movement, these affective happenings are part of the structure/function from which "lived" experience comes into being. Bodies felt in motion are central to the co-creating of one's experienced world.

> *I open the door and see your smile. I sharply inhale and feel the whole of my body rise up and the area of my heart bulge forward. I feel light and I too smile. You laugh, lean towards me and grasp onto my shoulders. Feeling the firmness of your hands around me, I now sense my urge to move closer to you. As the weight of my body shifts from heels to the balls of my toes, I step forward.*

This kind of interactive process is the intersubjective dimension of subjectivity, and it is based on kinesthetic resonance - *reverberating feeling tones that are generated from one person to another.* Kinesthetic resonance is the phenomenon brought forward most strongly in contacting experience - the sensed, the felt, and the lived. It is how we listen to ourselves with others and feel (then know) we are here. Kinesthetic resonance is the relational feel of our relationality.

Whenever there is some change in situation, however great or slight there is some change in the felt quality of movement and a change in the overall muscular tone of the body. Our overall muscular tone forms a postural attitude or the readiness to respond and relate to do something in relation to our situation. Postural attitude is the felt ground from which actions emerge and feelings arise. Again, whenever there is a change in situation, there is a change in the quality of movements, which change feelings, and a shift in overall postural tone/attitude, which organizes the next action. Likewise, as feelings and actions surface, postural attitudes shift.

Movement, feeling, and postural tone, then, are inextricably intertwined. They make apparent our experience of the world. Such experiences do not require mediation by thoughts or concepts, but rather are the person's immediate evaluation of the situation. This delicate interweaving, along with feedback from our external sense organs and tactility, forms the basis of awareness. Kinesthetically resonating and informed, we know what we know before we know it. From here, emotions organize, cognition takes shape and we can further appraise the situation.

Kinesthesia is the means by which psychotherapists can more fully understand

the dynamics of the unfolding patient-therapist relationship. It is "...the pre-reflective experience of empathy" and it "...opens the pathway to intimacy" (Staemmler 2011: 3, 14). Aware and resonating with others, we are more likely to disallow our well-practiced habitual modes of being and behaving. We can modify our mode of contacting by changing the quality of underlying supports as we shift from routinized behaviors to the more spontaneous and novel. In doing so, we have greater access to how another moving body—separate from us, but nonetheless similar—might feel. The kinetics of the other matches our own, and we can intuit the feelings are comparable.

Kinetics and the perception of moving

There is another component to our movement – the kinetics or movement itself. As we move in relation to others, we not only *feel* ourselves move but we simultaneously *perceive* our movements and along particular dimensions, i.e. horizontal (spreading-enclosing), vertical (ascending-descending), and sagittal (advancing-retreating). Movement forms or shapes space along these three dimensions. These kinetic pathways that are bounded by spatial dimensions also contribute to the feel of movement. In other words, we feel the qualities of our movement as we move along dimensional space, and we sense dimensional space through the experience of these qualities. According to movement theorist Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, "Spatial qualities . . . are fundamental to the three-dimensional experience manifested in self-movement." (Sheets-Johnstone 2010: 114). At any moment and through any movement, the feeling of "*inner*" and perception of "*outer*" can be directly sensed, and always in relation.

All movements have a spatial dynamic — a force in relation to counter forces or in phenomenological terms, a *pushing against* in relation to a *pushing-back*. We move to complete some task, i.e. satisfy an interest, curiosity or desire called forth from the environment, and in doing so, our kinesthetic self-movements are recognized as spatial movements. This "situational spatiality" (Merleau-Ponty 2012/1945: 102) is founded on our being located in a world that is kinesthetically sensed and felt. As kinesthetic resonance facilitates movement and movement is always orienting, the feel of intentionality is unavoidable.

Before there is body, before there is world, there is movement Before there is relationship, there is contact

Through the feel of their movements, babies learn what they can and cannot do with another. They practice their movement patterns repeatedly in order to accomplish a novel task. This process of learning is a total experience, i.e.

moving, sensing, feeling, perceiving, and the kinesthetically arrived meaning made from this. In time, a repertoire of fundamental movement transactions will appear. As these primary patterns form, always in relation to the world, they inform the baby's growing kinesthetic sense-of-self, which in turn informs the capacity to move. Movement offers the experience of *being a body* and, almost simultaneously, *being a body* offers the experience of *being of the world*. There from the start, movement critically organizes the sense-of-self that we are and will become.

> *Imagine that a three month-old baby lies in the arms of her father and looks up at his face. The father, holding the baby with a firm and gentle grasp, gazes down at his child. The baby lightly squirms in response to her father's touch and gaze. As she moves, she is kinesthetically resonating in relation to her father. The baby's movements are not something separate from the situation in which she is living, but rather express that situation. The baby progressively forms the experience of "I see you see me" "I feel you feel me"*

> *Imagine that the baby smiles at her father. The father smiles back, and the baby wiggles and laughs. We might infer for the baby, "I saw-felt-found a part of myself in your face, that I did not know was there until this very moment. Not until I experienced a smiling face responding to my smile did I know it was mine and that it mattered"*

> *Now the baby softly and gradually reaches her hand towards her father's smiling face and, kinesthetically resonating within the situation, senses and feels how the move will complete itself. Its anticipated achievement is made known through the dynamics of a presiding felt experience.*

Through moving, the baby realizes how her body in-forms the world and how the world in-forms her. Moving is the primary source of the baby's emerging sense of agency at a pre-reflective level (Stern 1985, Beebe & Lachmann 2002). The kinesthetic-kinetic-affective dynamic of human experience is critical to our perception of agency. "Reliable kinesthetic expectations, like the kinesthetic regularities on which they are based, are the foundation to our sense of agency, to our building a repertoire of 'I cans' to our ability to move and then move in meaningful ways" (Sheets-Johnstone 1999: 145). Bodily powers, then, arise from our primitive sense of aliveness. In time, "*I know what I can do with you because I have done it with you*" and simultaneously, "*I learn what you can do with me*" The felt past is ground to the feeling present.

Six fundamental movements: The motion of self

To understand the experience of kinesthetic resonance in greater depth, we must explore the stream upon which it flows – the six fundamental movements (R. Frank, 2001, R. Frank & F. La Barre, 2010, R. Frank 2013). In the process of finding and making themselves in the world, babies use a nonverbal vocabulary of micro-movements. They experience themselves *yielding with, pushing against, reaching for, grasping onto, pulling toward and releasing from* the other. Co-constructed within the early relational field, these interactions are primitive calls and responses in ongoing rapport. They organize an experience that is spatial as well as social (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka 2010) and give the baby a sense of connecting with while separating from others. Moving through their world, babies develop a pre-reflective kinesthetic orienting that lets them know the existence of that other - one whose space is not mine, but at the same time is forming mine.

Developing in the first year of life, these six fundamental movement patterns continue to be essential to all our interactions throughout life, supporting the most basic elements of animated psychological functioning. Although they are continually perceived, they remain peripheral to perception. They are the "force field" of contacting (Michael Vincent Miller 2015 in conversation) and shape the background from which a kinesthetic resonating sense-of-self emerges.

The later patterns of animated beings are founded on the earlier, which in turn are influenced by the next to come, and always expressed and experienced in relation. Although these transactional patterns may appear to be linear and discrete, by nature they are not. One category of movement does not occur in isolation from the others. Rather each movement, along with its ever-changing kinesthetic quality, interpenetrates the others and contributes to a spiral of experience—one that expands and condenses, pulsating with life.

Subjective experience is yoked to these moving patterns with their accompanying kinesthesia, one that is persistently "...reconstructed after each phase of movement" (Merleau-Ponty 2012/1945:118). We can push against the other freely or with a greater bound quality, we can reach abruptly or gradually, we can grasp with lower or higher intensity. The task to be accomplished calls forward the movements to be performed. The performance, in response, calls back to the task. Each novel task to be completed—contacting experience to be consummated—offers a potentially different invitation to be accepted (or not), from which the possibility of a diverse sequence of movements and their varied qualities appear co-created within a motor arc of *intentionality* (Merleau-Ponty 2012/1945: 137).

From the baby's and then adult's continued practice of these invariant fundamentals—*yielding with, pushing against, reaching for, grasping onto, pulling*

toward and releasing from - variations in pattern spring forth and contacting is modified by a multitude of kinesthetically felt qualities. Although learned in the first year of life, these patterns function here-and-now constituted by and constituting all present experience.

Through bodies in motion, temporal sequences evolve, space takes form and the baby develops a primordial sense of agency. Bodily agency is based on moving experience – "I reach for you there, as I move here" "I grasp onto you and feel you grasp onto me" Through the attractive other, movement patterns take shape. Every coordinating pattern supports the sequences of contacting—fore-contacting, contacting, final contacting and post-contacting—from the incipient co-creating of interest, curiosity, and desire until its consummation. The processes of contacting and their primary sensorimotor supports are inextricably linked—one does not exist without the other (Perls 1992: 84.)

I offer the movement vocabulary below as a way of analyzing the structure of contacting and the building of an emergent sense-of-self—kinesthetic, temporal, spatial, and, of course, dynamic. Verbs themselves do not exist without their object and so I have placed a preposition following each of the six fundamental movements to best describe the relationship that is always already there in the directed act of moving.

Fore-contacting

As proprioceptive awareness develops, the experience of *yielding with* (*surrendering with* or *allowing to be with*) the other moves to the foreground. At this time in the sequence, boundaries have not been well clarified. The lived body (the body I experience) has a gradually emerging sense of weight and a sense of width and volume. Breathing is deep and wide. A pre-reflective knowing of the situation springs into existence. Many possibilities are available as I gradually orient myself within the environment.

Contacting

Yielding with now becomes the ground, supporting the furtherance of the sequence from which *pushing against* naturally arises. Wherever and whenever I shift my weight in order to move, there is *pushing against* the other — separating from while at the same time including that entity in experience. A *push* from any of my limbs (head, base of pelvis, arms or legs) enhances sensations of my midline as my body coheres. What is sensed at the periphery, the limbs in relation to that which they touch and which touches them, can be felt at the center, forming a unified whole.

Possibilities of the situation now narrow and my intention clarifies — a figure

emerges. As I feel the quality of my pushing against the other, I experience an active "*pushing-back*" as the situation reveals itself. There is a marked transition or greater differentiation between what is "me" and what is "other" The quality of pushing against, or resisting the other as the other pushes back and resists me, generates a thickness of experience. Excitement builds.

In the pushing process, desire clarifies as an incipient *reaching* emerges towards its object. Contacting progresses and the unfolding of my reaching for, supported by my *pushing against*, brings the other into closer relation and I am better informed as to the developing situation (or the choice may be to push away).

Final contacting

The sequence continues as *reaching for* becomes ground for *grasping onto*. In my grasp, what I desire is now sensed, felt and known. From here, an innate *pulling toward* the other to incorporate emerges and the differentiation between "I" and "you" is at its greatest. My intention and yours is understood, sensed and felt by each of us. Excitement peaks.

Post-contacting

The *pulling toward* of incorporation is followed by an experience of *releasing from*, which moves foreground as the well differentiated "I" spreads and widens and an experience of relative merging follows. What was formerly other disorganizes as "I" and "You" become "I/You" sometimes known as "We."

Releasing from then moves into the experience of *yielding with* once more. Excitement diminishes and the figure closes and becomes ground. Within the now of this *yielding* experience is the support of what was, the past experience on which it now stands.

Another way to describe this ongoing spatial temporal dynamic is to imagine a vast sea when it is calm, mere ripples on its surface. From this background of apparent stillness, a wave collects, pushes upward and inevitably reaches toward the attractive and attracting other, the sandy beach. Once sea meets sand, it grasps onto and pulls this other toward itself. As the wave loses form, the sand is released and gradually sinks downward to become part/whole of the sedimentation from which the next wave arises. Ebbing and flowing, rising and falling, expanding and condensing – such is the primordial rhythm of all life.

The moving processes described above form the ground of a kinetic-kinesthetic resonating sense-of-self. In the act of moving with, against, for, onto, toward and from the other, we find and make ourselves in the process. We are

the mover and the move. These underlying currents are the core elements that contribute to figure-ground formation. As we see, sense, feel how these currents flow, we know something important as to how we exist in relation; how we meet at this very moment.

I have given the example of contacting processes in which excitements arise and diminish fluidly. Here these moving patterns form the ground for the next ones to emerge as the next, in turn, feed back to the earlier in a rhythmically moving spiral of experience. Each pattern moves foreground and background naturally in service of the arising organizing figure. But this example of a fluidly moving process is not always the case. When there is fixation, one or two patterns may appear held in foreground while the others remain far background seeming unavailable and almost irretrievable. The sense-of-self hardens and the rhythmic flow necessary for a fluidly building experience is habitually constrained. Repetition replaces spontaneity and creativity is replaced by the all too familiar/habitual.

Previously, we imagined a baby-parent dyad in harmony and reciprocity and exemplifying a fluidly developing sense-of-self. Now we examine a different dyad illustrating the developing of repetitive constraints.

> *As the father reaches down to pick up his baby, he narrows the skin along his forehead and pushes his lips together. As he lifts his daughter out of her crib, his movements are bound, high-intensity and abrupt. The baby, especially sensitive to facial expressions, is both visually and bodily resonating with the kinetics of her father and responds kinetically and kinesthetically. In other words, as she feels him advancing toward her and then lifting her up and away from the support of her crib, she pulls her arms and legs together, which narrows the areas of her chest and abdomen and she holds her breath. She kinesthetically registers these feelings as "not good"*

> *While holding onto her with his bound, high intensity grasp, the baby abruptly reaches her head and eyes away from her father and begins to subtly yet firmly push her pelvis and legs against the limiting resistance of her father's bound embrace. Misinterpreting his daughter's developing discomfort and desire for distance and imagining that she is calling for a more solid container, the father abruptly pulls his daughter towards his chest. The baby then whimpers, and her father begins quickly bouncing her up-and-down with an unyielding staccato rhythm.*

In this example, both parent and baby bring a kinesthetic-kinetic history to their meeting. Perhaps the father was not well enough supported in his infancy and throughout his childhood. As he reaches down to pick up his child, an

enduring relational theme (Jacobs 2009: 69) emerges. The unaware and self-fulfilled expectation of awkwardness — "No one held me and made me feel safe so I don't know how to do that for you" Or the unaware expression of resentment — "Why would I make you feel safe if no one made me feel safe?" The father's dynamical reaching action, bound, abrupt and high-intensity, was at one time well-practiced in reaction to the significant figures in his early life. These historic experiences of reaching and being reached are now re-stimulated in the present and create a familiar kinesthetic resonance that is only peripherally sensed and felt. Although the father's behavior is not yet understood cognitively, it is already grasped in terms of bodily engagement.

Imagine that in the life of the baby, a tenuous holding experience has already become routine. Now, even before she is touched and moved, she will predict what is coming — that the holding situation will not be supportive — and she reacts in anticipation. As she sees her father move toward her, she prepares by binding her muscles, holding her breath, and heightening the intensity of her movements. Kinesthetically resonating and pre-reflectively aware of her circumstance, she feels the coming "next" She lives the situation at hand, contacting the full reality of her experience. These kinds of repeated occurrences become etched into the newly forming repertoire of baby-parent transactions and the baby's patterns of breath, gesture, posture and gait take form. Her ongoing bodily responses to her father confirm how she was received. The parent's body also is influenced in these ongoing nonverbal conversations.

As exemplified in the baby-parent scenario above, the experienced past resonates kinesthetically in each new moment. The unfolding re-membering is neither in the muscles nor nervous system of the child nor parent, but rather springs forward in the co-created forming of a kinesthetically situated sense-of-self. Patterns of kinesthetic-kinetic remembering are not in the least imprecise or abstract for baby nor for adult. As postural-gestural patterns are co-shaped in this now new moment, the earlier contacting experiences in relation to previous and significant others in our life and their kinesthetic values are enfolded within. The earlier experience is always part/whole of the continuing emerging sense-of-self. At every threshold of experience, we look for the other that is already there.

> *Imagine the patient who, during session, slowly reaches his arms towards his therapist as he simultaneously moves his upper body forward and away from the back of his chair. As his reaching pattern unfolds, familiar kinesthetic-kinetic impressions now inform and form his pattern. Feeling himself move beyond the presumed safety of his personal kinesphere and into a space where he may not belong, he suddenly pulls his arms inward and pushes himself back.*

Enveloped within both his reaching toward and pushing back from the therapist, is the kinesthetic-kinetic familiar and reliable historic expectation of what he imagines he can and cannot do with her. With every kinesthetically felt relational move, the sedimented past flows into the anticipated future.

The therapist, sensitizing herself to the dynamics of situation, sees and feels herself moved by her patient's reaching out-pushing back gesture. As she makes herself present to the subtle yet profound transactions of this encounter and attunes to him, she lays the ground from which he can take support. The situation rearranges, and a novel co-creating of relationship is made possible.

The kinetic-kinesthetically felt past is part of pre-reflective consciousness that may never come to full consciousness. And it is not always necessary to make conscious what is in the pre-reflective realm. It is a pre-cognitive kind of understanding, not yet made distinct, and which says far more than when we make it distinct by our interpreting too soon or at all.

The prior parent-baby and adult patient-therapist scenarios illustrate the phenomenal passage of trans-generational trauma — developmentally or otherwise organized — and it begins with kinesthetic-kinetic resonance. In trauma, and for very good reasons, we no longer give in to and take from the world spontaneously or creatively. The embodied and repeating relational themes that accompany our limited movement repertoires are more often unaware but nevertheless felt. Whereas once it was possible to clearly attune to and resonate with the intentions of the other and respond, in a dissociated state of trauma with diminished sense-of-self at the contact boundary, kinesthetic capacity is dulled and the possibilities of the situation close.

From theory to practice
"As we awaken to the experience of our moving body, we awaken to the experience of the world" (M. Merleau-Ponty)

As therapists, in our quest to understand the phenomenology of developing human experience, whether in the time-line of the first year of life or the moment-to-moment of the present, we need to know how fundamental and spontaneous interactions form a kinetic-kinesthetic resonant background from which creative ways of being and behaving can emerge or, conversely, how such primary interactive patterns become fixed and form distortions in resonance. In so doing, we investigate the forming and functioning of self. The case vignette below is a kind of microanalysis of the moment-to-moment structure of therapy by looking at the function of movement transactions. The patient's emerging self

develops in learning what she can and cannot do within the therapy situation as she discovers herself through movement.

Just as babies learn their bodies and themselves first and foremost through ongoing and co-created kinetic-kinesthetic experiences, so too can the adult patient relearn her capacity to make sense of her subjective self within the patient-therapist field.

At the time of this session, 42 year-old Sara and I had been working together for several months. Before coming to me, she had been a patient in gestalt therapy for approximately five years.

Sara tells me a story about an uncomfortable situation between herself and a boy she dated when she was 17. The boy asked her to do something sexual with him that made Sara feel uncomfortable. But rather than say "no" she complied.

As she speaks, Sara slowly hollows and narrows her chest and shortens her spine. Her head now pushes downward and she looks at the floor. Her hands, once resting by her sides, now grasp onto each other. Her feet, which appeared planted on the floor, now subtly push backward leaving Sara precariously balanced on each set of toes. Her thighs rotate and press inward as her knees pull together. Sara appears to be shrinking.

Sitting across from and relatively close to her, I feel farther away than I actually am and I notice I am holding my breath. I take a fuller exhale, bring my hands to my lap and enjoy the feel of their weight on my thighs. A memory emerges, something long forgotten, and I find myself identifying with Sara's story.

When she finishes, we both pause. I feel a sense of emptiness around me and a sinking feeling of defeat in my chest. I adjust myself finding the back of my chair behind and the seat under me. I take a slow full breath and then wonder aloud what Sara might be feeling after telling me her story.

Sara raises her head and looks directly at me. "I feel shame" she responds, and then glances downward.

I wait several moments and ask, "How might I be part of your shameful experience?"

Sara looks directly at me and says, "I always feel shameful when I talk about this or even when I think about what happened."

I pause and ask again "How might I be part of your shameful experience?"

This time Sara waits and then sighs deeply. "Well, this kind of thing would never happen to you" she says convinced and convincingly.
"What makes you think so?" I ask.

"You sit up so straight and tall. No, this would never happen to you."

Through the clarity of her statement, our next exploration is constructed. At my invitation, Sara and I begin "shrinking" and "growing" very slowly and incrementally in relation to one another. Without words, we explore the feel of our movements and in all dimensions. I shorten, narrow and hollow, while she lengthens, widens and bulges, and so forth as we explore this continuum.

After some time passes in mutual fascination, Sara and I come to mirror each other — we both simultaneously grow and expand. Sara looks at me, momentarily pauses, and then suddenly shrinks "I cannot be as big as you," she exclaims.

In the experiment, Sara and I reflected upon ourselves and primarily through movement rather than cognitively. We acted in concert with one another and with no pre-conceived notions of what we were doing or what we were to do. I gave as much attention to my experience of her movements and to my own as I did my visual perception of them. I felt/grasped the subtle movements of her body and evaluated their aesthetic values. By imagining the feel of Sara's movements, I could enter her world. In the continuing process of therapy, these kinds of ongoing animate experiences became woven into the fabric of the relationship, accumulating insights for both Sara and myself.

No posture-gesture can be completely freed from its socially acquired meaning, but when we attend to arising kinesthetic resonances produced by and producing gestures of one's own and of the other, we can separate from what we assume a movement means and discover the reality of the moving situation itself. Sara's familiar stunted posture that she perennially labeled as "bad" took on new and different meaning in the moment as its relational significance clarified. My upright posture "said" something important to Sara as her shrinking experience, "said" something important to me. In addition, with a heightening of kinesthetic awareness, Sara could expand her posture-gestural repertoire over time and experience the novelty of our building relationship.

As Jean-Marie Robine states "When a patient sits in front of me and tells me that he is anxious, I can choose to listen to his words not only as words *in* a certain situation, but also as words *of* the situation, as if these words were

belonging to an undifferentiated field which has to be explored, instead of to an individual, the one who tells them" (Robine 2011: 113). Similarly, rather than the movement of *shrinking* being Sara's individual symptom, it too belonged to an undifferentiated field. As we explored, attuning to the emerging kinetic-kinesthetic resonances, Sara and I could spontaneously evaluate our relationship and together validate what was happening between us as real and true. From here, a new narrative could emerge and through movement in awareness, its meaning comes alive.

Experiences of kinesthetic-kinetic resonance ground our social interactions from the very beginning of our lives and are crucial in the making of meaning throughout life. Such body-to-body kinesthetically felt engagements shape the background from which the present experience becomes figural. In our everyday therapy experience, this process begins as soon as our patients press our doorbell with a certain rhythm and intensity, say hello and walk into our consulting room and sit themselves on our couch in characteristic ways. These transactions are essential and fundamental to the opening dialogue or "starting situation" of therapy (Perls, Hefferline, Goodman 1972/1951). If we listen to our bodily resonance right from the start, we are open to the possibilities of what is emerging between our patients and ourselves. Staying close to the felt-qualities of a moving dialogue allows the therapist to remain open to whatever unfolds. We wait with utmost availability and listen for the next step rather than making it happen. This is crucial in allowing the relationship to disclose itself rather than closing it off by interpreting the moment too soon or at all.

Working through movement in awareness, we re-find our lived sensuality, the motion of self in process, which sometimes has felt irretrievably lost to both patient and therapist. We are not merely aware of how we sit in the chair or how we breathe, common and useful interventions in gestalt therapy, but further how we negotiate the qualities of our sensed situated spatiality. In other words, all the ways the micro-movements of our existence move through the other as the other moves through us. That is, we focus on the continual dance we call contacting -— the dance of the between.

In Summary

The six fundamental movements and the accompanying aesthetic kinesthetic resonances they elicit are the phenomenal experience of an emerging and dynamic function of self and add a more complete aspect to the unfolding processes of contacting. They provide multiple pre-reflective meanings that are part/whole of the arising situation. From here, reflective cognition is made.

Attending to kinetic-kinesthetic resonance within therapy is not merely to attend solely to the physical or solely to the feeling qualities of experience as they are not separate from one another, but rather the process of resonance is a holistic apprehension of the emerging moment. In the process of capturing the other, animated function of self becomes manifest. As we come into this kind of direct and profound contact with the other, we also become part of a greater collective process common to all human experience, that of coming into being.

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SELF
A POLYPHONY OF CONTEMPORARY GESTALT THERAPISTS
Jean-Marie ROBINE (Ed.)

Sixty-five years after the creation of gestalt therapy, it seemed useful and interesting to question gestalt therapy theorists on their understanding and use of this concept of 'self', and to invite them to deploy it and clarify the directions in which they may have been able to influence and enrich it.

The authors of these chapters are the major theorists of gestalt therapy today. Every one has been able to take a refreshing look at this foundational concept. The variety of gateways they chose, the sources to which they return, such as psychoanalysis or pragmatism, to open up new perspectives, the broadening of their scope by bringing in approaches from neighboring disciplines (such as phenomenology, object relations theory, neurosciences, spirituality, aesthetics...) get us closer to the spirit of our founders, who hoped that each of us would appropriate their proposals, far from any idea of orthodoxy or a single-minded approach. No doubt that this essential book will enrich our common ground and contribute to an international common dynamics.

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